

*The
Handwriting
on the Wall*

DAVID
FOX



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The
Handwriting
on the
Wall

*The Amazing Exploits
of the Shadowers, Inc.*

THE DOOM DEALER

ETHEL OPENS THE DOOR

THE MAN WHO CONVICTED HIM-
SELF

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

Chronicled by
DAVID FOX

Handwriting, Social &
11

The Handwriting on the Wall

AN EXPLOIT OF
THE SHADOWS, INC.

BY
DAVID FOX *revised*



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The
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on the
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CHAPTER I

THE CHANGELING

THE SHADOWERS, INC., was unique among agencies of private investigation. Not only in its discrimination in the cases which it accepted—to say nothing of its original, strictly individualized methods of procedure—but in its very personnel it differed from any other organization for the suppression of crime.

Dedicating its services solely to clients of the highest social as well as financial standing to whom confidence and discretion would be more potent factors than prosecution, it undertook no affairs of a scandalous nor trivial nature; yet its half dozen members were specialists in widely dissimilar lines and together they formed a combination qualified to deal with practically every type of malefactor known to the records of the police and secret service.

Confidence and discretion were as essential to The Shadows as to any of their clients, and well might they be considered specialists in dealing with crime, for all six were themselves past masters in every form of roguery short of murder. Indeed, they had all, with the sole exception of Rex Powell, their leader and moving spirit, at various unfortunate periods served terms in prison for their transgressions. Hence they had welcomed his suggestion that, having formerly

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played the game from the wrong side—wrong, not necessarily from the reformer's standpoint but from the standpoint of practicability and profit—they now should turn their highly specialized knowledge to the solving of crime problems. The result during the few months following their incorporation had exceeded their most optimistic hopes.

Nevertheless the offices of The Shadows in the Bolingbroke, newest and most imposing of business buildings mid-town, bore a distinctly forlorn air one balmy April evening when Clifford Nichols, ex-forgery and counterfeiter, opened the outer door with his key and glanced at the empty chair behind the desk as he started for the inner sanctum where he held forth as handwriting expert of the firm.

Then he paused, a frown of annoyance creasing his esthetic brow, and the slim, tapering white fingers whose artistry in the past had hoodwinked half the banking institutions in the country played nervously with his small, dark goatee. Some one had placed a tiny bunch of fragrant pink arbutus on the exquisitely inlaid desk. Cliff Nichols eyed the oddly shaped glass receptacle which held it and then unceremoniously thrust open a sliding panel which led to the laboratory on his left.

“You put that confounded arbutus on Ethel's desk!” he declared accusingly. “Good heavens, Henry, isn't it bad enough even after four months to come in day after day and find her place vacant, without having the fact emphasized by a—a memorial?”

Henry Corliss, very fat, very bald and all of fifty, looked up from the chemical retorts spread upon the table before him with a wistful expression on his round, good-natured face. His erstwhile profession as a purveyor of fake medicines had for years held in abeyance the passion for toxicology which, combined with his rare knowledge and research, bade fair to bring him belated eminence now, and had already rendered him an indispensable adjunct to the organization. He glanced slyly towards the desk.

“Those sassy little spring flowers kinder reminded me of Ethel,” he remarked apologetically. “Pert, and fresh, and gosh-almighty sweet! You don’t think she could have gone back—to shoplifting, I mean? I don’t see how Rex doped it out, when he watched her working the stores, that she’d be such a little wonder of a secretary for us, but we never half appreciated her till she took this vacation—”

“You there, Cliff? Thought you’d gone to Atlantic City.” The panel at the farther side of the laboratory slipped aside, disclosing the handsome—if somewhat weak—face and snappily attired figure of the youngest recruit to The Shadows, the skillful ex-yegg and boxman who had developed into their mechanical genius.

“I decided to put it off, I don’t know why,” Cliff responded idly. “Has Rex been in?”

“Not since morning.” Phil Howe’s expression was unwontedly crestfallen and he added disgustedly; “There’s been nothing doing and it’s time to shut up

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shop. We haven't had a worth-while case since Ethel left us flat!"

Henry Corliss shook his head in lugubrious assent and Cliff Nichols remarked:

"There doesn't appear to be a leaf stirring. I really dropped in to-night on the off chance that there might be news of our little honorary member; I fancy I'll wait, anyway, and see Rex."

The angle of the small study, glimpsed behind Phil Howe, revealed walls lined with richly bound books of reference and the corner of a table laden with weighing machines, magnifying glasses and bottles of inks, dyes and acids. It was Cliff Nichols' own den, and that of Phil lay just beyond, the two together with the laboratory and ante-room forming four sides of the six-sided central chamber presided over by the president, Rex Powell.

The remaining two apartments of the suite were occupied by Lucian Baynes, the art connoisseur and jewel expert whose smuggling days had made history; and by George Roper, king of confidence men and fake spiritualists, whose unique study of human nature had made him valuable now as cross-examiner extraordinary of reluctant witnesses.

At the present moment, beyond the hexagonal inner room, Lucian Baynes stood, poised in the aperture between his diminutive studio and the somber, barbarically luxurious audience chamber of the pseudo-soothsayer, peering with interest at the long, thin, black-

clad legs protruding from beneath the gorgeously draped dais.

“What in the name of the Sphinx are you doing, George?” he drawled. “Worshiping some new god of the gullible?”

“Can’t find a benighted thing in this temple of bunk since Ethel went away!” A mournful, muffled voice sounded from under the heavy folds of dull, glimmering metallic stuff and the legs crawled backward, bringing to view an attenuated, frock-coated figure and an ascetic, dignified countenance, streaked with dust and framed in dark hair graying slightly at the temples. “If we only knew where that enterprising young woman had sequestered herself I think Rex’s mind would be easier; he’s been worrying lately.”

Lucian Baynes shrugged his slim, London-clad shoulders.

“Ethel survived a precarious childhood in heaven knows what part of the slums, and a brilliant, if brief, career of larceny under the able direction of Lefty Jane; I fancy she is capable of taking care of herself during her proposed campaign of self-education, but I miss her as much as you do. Has it occurred to you that she may have become too cultivated to associate with the rest of us? Remember, she still considers us a band of unregenerate crooks running a new swindling game—or worse. What if she has decided to forswear us and all our works?”

George Roper got slowly to his feet, consternation

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struggling with incredulity in the look he cast upon his confrère.

“Lord, you don’t think that, Luce? She can’t be much over twenty, but she’s as loyal as they come and the love of the game is bred in the bone with her just as it is with the rest of us. We’d never get anybody to take her place.”

An abrupt signal from the buzzer seemed to give emphasis to his final remark, and Lucian turned toward the panel leading to the central room from which all the other offices radiated.

“There’s Rex now! Wonder if there’s something in the wind? Come on, George.”

The man who nodded to them in greeting from the head of the old Jacobean council table was in the middle forties, tall and well-built with the assured poise of the aristocrat. His eager, tense attitude, his clean-cut features, and his incisive gray eyes belied the touch of silver at his temples, and as he glanced about at his five companions—for the other three had already joined him—his dominance over them was apparent, widely diversified in breeding and type though they were.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” Rex Powell’s crisply cordial tones held a note of reawakened purpose which had been absent of late, and Lucian and Clifford, recruits themselves from a higher social order, eyed each other significantly with swift anticipation. “Since we are all here together I suggest that we hold a little conference.”

"Holy Cat!" Phil Howe's merry eyes began to sparkle. "Have we got a new case?"

"It's Ethel!" Henry Corliss folded his hands over his rotund stomach with the contentment of utter conviction. "She's coming back."

"No, it isn't about Ethel." Rex Powell shook his head and for an instant his eyes clouded. Then he lifted his shoulders as though to throw off the burden of an unwelcome thought and added briskly: "We haven't any prospective case to consider, either, but Cliff has decided to postpone his start for Atlantic City till to-morrow, and I'd like to discuss with you a new plan for reaching prospective clients. You recall that when we founded The Shadows we sent out five hundred engraved notes announcing our special line of service to as many matrons of exclusive position, and an equal number of circulars to financiers here in the East?"

"Yes, and remember what we made out of the first three cases alone!" George Roper gazed ceilingward in complacent reminiscence. "That affair of the three Burning Black Pearls alone brought each of us more than any individual haul we ever made in our lives, and solving the problem of the disappearing safe was a moral satisfaction, as well as highly remunerative, though Ethel did very nearly spoil the game for us. As Luce says, it was all due to you, Rex."

"That is true." Lucian Baynes nodded. "If Rex has a new plan now, though, for heaven's sake let us try it! We've had no case of even superficial interest

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since the matter of the Merrington Blue Diamond and the gruesome schemes of that dealer in death—!”

“Say, whatta you expect in less than a year?” Phil Howe demanded. “Rex did a lot more than just get us together. Weren’t these offices all his idea, with the mechanical arrangements—the dictaphones that let us hear in our rooms what goes on in this one and the noiseless panels instead of doors; to say nothing of the ticker Ethel used to operate from the hidden keyboard on her knees, that reeled off on the strip of paper through the slot in the wall here her own opinion of our clients while she was pumping them in the anteroom?”

“They are all useful, but not as important as the contrivances for quickly changing the aspect of this room so as to bring it into accord with the different types whose confidence we have to gain,” George Roper observed. “The psychology of it is perfect.”

“I wish some of us had been gifted with enough psychological bunk to guess what Ethel was up to when she asked for a vacation right after we finished the Merrington case.” Henry Corliss sighed heavily. “Of course I handled that, just as Luce had taken charge of the affair of the Burning Pearls and Phil was our boss in the investigation into that old rascal’s safe. It was my fault that Ethel wanted to leave us four months ago, for I got her to dye her hair and pose as a refined beauty expert up in Millerstown to get the gossip from the blue-blooded dames and find out who was sending those poison pen letters;

but I don't believe she went away to educate herself or hide till her hair got yellow again, either! If we only knew—!"

His utterance was cut off as abruptly as though a hand had suddenly closed about his fat throat, for a peculiar sound had broken in upon it—a sound unheard in that quiet room for four long months. It was a faint, metallic ticking and it seemed to come from the wall separating them from the anteroom.

"Gawd!" Phil Howe muttered under his breath. "Something's working Ethel's ticker!"

No one echoed his exclamation, but all eyes turned in the direction from which the staccato click came, and Henry pushed back his chair, his round, genial face paling. George Roper stopped him with a hurried gesture.

A small slit had opened in the panel from behind which the sound emanated and a narrow strip of paper appeared, unwinding like a ribbon.

Clifford Nichols glanced at their chief and then sprang for the message, smoothing the paper with nervously trembling fingers while his sensitive face twitched.

"What in the name of—!" He broke off and then read aloud: "'Young girl desires position secretary. Minds her own business, does what she is told, don't chew gum, dye hair, or—'"

"Ethel!" Lucian exclaimed, but Rex was the first to spring up and tear aside the sliding panel.

In the chair behind the desk, with a small keyboard

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on her shimmering brown-clad knees, sat a demure young person with a pretty, slightly flushed face and a smooth glint of golden hair, like spun floss beneath a small hat redolent of the sophisticated springtime of Parisian boulevards.

"My dear girl!" The clicking stopped as Rex Powell took both her hands.

"Ethel, where have you . . . ?"

"How could you . . . ?"

"Why didn't you let us know . . . !"

"Four whole months . . . !"

"Gee, ain't we grand!"

The remaining five Shadows spoke almost in unison with their leader as they crowded about her, but Ethel Jepson raised guileless blue eyes to Rex's face.

"I didn't know whether you'd want me to come back or not, but I just couldn't stay away a day longer!" she said.

"Not want you!" Rex echoed reproachfully. "We've been worried to death! Where have you been—?"

He stopped abruptly, for a tawny, silky ball of malign fury had darted out from under her chair and launched itself upon him with a high-pitched snarl.

"Come here, Wee Sing." Ethel picked the diminutive dog up and tucked it under her arm with an air of unconcern as she rose, but her flush had deepened. "May I put him in Mr. Corliss' laboratory until I go home? We won't hear him howl in there."

"Of course, Ethel. Did you bring him for me to experiment on?" Henry pushed open the panel leading to his sanctum.

"No, I didn't," she replied, as literally as of old. "I brought him because he bit Mrs. Gorham and she's in hysterics. I don't dare leave him at home till he gets used to the maids."

Dropping her still snarling burden on the laboratory floor, she closed the panel and turned to precede the others into Rex's study, while behind her The Shadows exchanged glances that spoke volumes. The Ethel of four months ago would have waited to follow them instead of tripping ahead like one accustomed to the niceties of social usage; also, she would have been incapable of uttering three consecutive sentences without interlarding them with colloquialisms. But there was a change far more profound and indefinable than mere manner and speech. This couldn't be Ethel Jepson!

"What's the idea?" Phil Howe demanded, unable to restrain his curiosity. "Why the tough Peke, and who's Mrs. Gorham, and where do 'the maids' come in? You talk like a million, and you look like twice as much!"

"Wee Sing isn't tough, he's just temperamental." Ethel Jepson lifted thin, arched brows. "Mrs. Gorham is my chaperone, and the maids—"

"Lord-A'mighty!" Henry Corliss sat down suddenly in his chair at the council table as though his short, plump legs had failed him. "'Chaperone!'

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Ain't you living downtown with that old woman—?"

"No, I found a position for her as housekeeper. Mrs. Gorham knows I'm private secretary to Mr. Rex Powell but it's quite the thing for really smart girls to go in for business careers now and she doesn't mind. She's the widow of Talbot Gorham, if you happen to have heard of him." Ethel paused and then her little laugh rippled out on the stunned silence. "It's rather a jump from working only a year ago for Lefty Jane, but Mrs. Gorham likes me and I help keep her Park Avenue apartment going. I met her at Hot Springs."

"My sainted aunt!" Cliff Nichols exclaimed. "Mrs. Talbot Gorham! I heard that he came a financial cropper before he died, but she is decidedly in society still. If she ever hears, Ethel, that you're connected with The Shadows and—er—what our former professions were—!"

"She won't," Ethel responded tranquilly. "If you can put through your deals so cleverly that even I, working with you, can't see how they're done, there isn't much danger that she'll find out about any of us."

This naïve tribute held them enthralled for a moment and then George Roper asked mildly:

"What were you doing at Hot Springs? Don't you think, my child, you'd better come across and tell us all about it?"

"I wanted to make a lady of myself, didn't I?" Ethel smiled. "I didn't know then that it can't be done—not Miss Merrington's sort, anyway. You

have to be born to that, but I did the next best thing. I went to a hotel and had my hair doctored, bought a lot more clothes, then hired a maid and went down to Palm Beach to meet my aunt."

"Your—aunt!" There was awed respect in Lucian Baynes' tones.

"Yes." Ethel nodded. "She didn't appear, of course, but a nice family did from the West, who thought everybody was in society but themselves, and they were so sorry for a sweet little thing like me being unchaperoned that they asked me to join them and go to Hot Springs. They left just after I met Mrs. Gorham and I killed my aunt. That's all, only I've been learning right along."

"I should say you have!" Phil Howe ejaculated. "That don't explain the Peke, though!"

"Oh, he was a—a present." Ethel Jepson glanced down involuntarily at the bunch of valley lilies clustered about the single expensive orchid at her belt and then added defensively: "He likes me so I haven't the heart to give him away— But tell me, have I missed anything big?"

"No. You put the jinx on us, Ethel. We haven't turned a trick that got us anything like real money since you've been gone," Phil mourned.

"Then I'm in time." She drew a deep breath. "Something is going to break quick and I couldn't bear to be out of it. That's why I didn't even wait till to-morrow."

Rex Powell eyed her keenly.

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"How do you know something is going to break, Ethel?"

"I simply felt that I had to get back to my desk," she explained, adding with a touch of wistfulness: "That is, if it's still mine. Am I—am I taken on again?"

She asked the question collectively of her employers, but Rex nodded with a grave smile.

"Your desk has long been waiting for you, Ethel, but I want to know just what you mean about a new case."

"It's intuition, I guess." She spoke with serene confidence. "You needn't smile, Mr. Corliss; a woman can tell when things are going to happen. I just feel as if we were waiting, waiting—!"

"That's what we've been doing!" Phil snorted.

"I don't know." Cliff Nichols shook his head. "There wasn't any reason for putting off my trip to Atlantic City till to-morrow, but I changed my mind."

"You see?" Ethel darted a glance around the table. "Mr. Nichols had a little of the same feeling. I thought so when I saw the Atlantic City address in his handwriting on the pad out there and then found him still here with you. I'm not just waiting for anything to turn up, but I know somebody is thinking of calling on us right now! A message is on the way!"

Her clear young voice rang with sincerity and George Roper remarked solemnly:

"My child, when the other members of this organization retire on their ill-gotten gains you and I will

find a partnership. With you to read the future, and me on the outside to pick up the dope about our patrons, we'd gather in all the loose money in the world!"

"Well, if anything's coming to-night, it'd better start soon, for it's nearly midnight," Phil said skeptically.

"As late as that?" Rex pulled a small notebook from his pocket. "Just give me your new address, Ethel, in case we should happen to need you in a hurry, and then we'll—"

"Ah," Ethel threw up her hand suddenly, interrupting him, for through the aperture leading to the outer office, which they had forgotten to close, there came the sharp, insistent whirring of the telephone upon her desk. "I knew it! Switch on your extension, Mr. Powell."

In a moment she had darted to the instrument and picked up the receiver as Rex held his own to his ear.

"The Showers?" A man's voice muffled and shaking, as though the speaker were indescribably shocked yet retained sufficient self-possession to be cautious, vibrated over the wire. "I received a circular of yours some months ago. I must see some one there to-night, within half an hour! I will bring a card."

"What is the name, please?" Ethel asked calmly.

"I will bring a card!" the voice repeated with augmented emphasis. "Put me on to some one in charge at once! This is a matter which cannot wait!"

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Ethel glanced over her shoulder into the inner room and Rex Powell gestured peremptorily. After a moment he spoke into the transmitter.

"This is the president of The Shadows. You wish an appointment at this hour? We were just leaving and it is rather against our rules—"

"Rules?" The voice broke suddenly, harshly. "I must notify others later—*others*—do you understand? It must be done to-night! Unless I see you first it will be too late!"

"Very well," Rex replied with swift decision. "We will wait here for you."

Replacing the receiver he turned to the rest who were watching him in tense expectancy.

"Our client cannot give his name over the 'phone, nor hint at the nature of his business, but he will be here almost at once. Whatever has happened, he must notify the authorities to-night without fail, and from his tone I should judge that the man is in a desperate state. There is only one crime which our laws compel a citizen to report whether he wishes to or not—that is, with drastic penalties."

His tone was grave with portent and a stir ran around the table. Then Henry Corliss uttered the word in all their thoughts.

"Murder!"

CHAPTER II

IN THEIR HANDS

“**L**ORD-A'MIGHTY, what do you suppose is coming now? Anyway, it's good to be on a real case again, with Ethel out there on the job!” Henry exclaimed, and then chuckled. Ethel had remained in the outer office to receive the late-coming client and the panel between was closed. “I didn't honestly believe she could quit us! Who but that darn little kid could dive right into the swim, as she has, and keep her head above water all the time? How did she do it?”

“She answered that herself; by learning right along,” Rex Powell commented quietly, but he did not share the medical expert's amusement, and Cliff observed:

“Our little Ethel has been learning more than social aquatics! If I'm any judge of toy dogs that abominable Pekinese is worth a cool thousand or so, and that corsage cluster rather outshines Henry's modest arbutus. I fancy she has added more than a chaperone to her train.”

“You don't mean a john!” Phil's jaw dropped.

“It's a complication of course.” Lucian Baynes shook his head. “We might have expected it before this, however. Ethel is so amazingly efficient that we have overlooked her quite obvious attractions.”

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“Some one else hasn’t, evidently.” George Roper was beginning when Rex interrupted.

“Nonsense!” His tone was sharp with unaccustomed asperity. “She’s only a child, with all a child’s adaptability and native resourcefulness, and there isn’t a trace of sentiment about her, thank heaven! Her life with petty crooks like Lefty Jane has left her singularly unspoiled but it hasn’t tended to make her exactly romantic! We won’t have that to worry over!”

Lucian glanced at his clouded face and then swiftly at Cliff Nichols, but before any one spoke again Rex leaned forward and touched the invisible spring beneath his desk. The dictaphone brought to them the sound of the closing front door and then a voice, shaking but clear and distinct.

“The president of The Shadows—is he here? I have an appointment made half an hour ago by ’phone.”

“‘An appointment?’” Ethel Jepson repeated in very sweet but cool tones. “The members of the firm are in conference for the moment. Er—what name, please?”

There was concrete evidence that she had not forgotten the former procedure of temporizing with a new client while she transmitted her personal impression of him to her waiting employers, for the faint clicking had recommenced and the ribbon of paper was unwinding itself through the slot once more. Its message was not, however, in the vernacular of earlier days.

“‘Stunning looking chap, smart dinner clothes, light top coat, London label in hat, well bred but dreadfully excited, wait.’” Cliff read the strip he had hastened to tear off and then raised whimsical eyes. “Our Ethel is learning punctuation but she can’t take the time for capitals.”

Rex shrugged with an impatient gesture and the visitor’s reply reached them in a slightly more even tone.

“I prefer, under the circumstances, to give that only to the person I have come to see.”

“That is unfortunate.” There was just the right shade of impersonality in Ethel’s response. “Perhaps you didn’t know, but it is a rule of the office to receive no one without a card.”

“I’ve brought one.” The man spoke with abrupt capitulation, and Cliff turned back to the panel, for the ticker was sending forth its message again.

“Can’t hold him much longer, keeps looking back at door as if expecting somebody to follow, name on card ‘Richard Monckton.’”

Cliff’s voice dropped oddly as he uttered the last words and Lucian frowned, but Rex shook his head in quick dissent. To Henry, George and Phil the name patently meant nothing.

“I have had no instructions to announce you, Mr. Monckton. Is the matter pressing?” Ethel asked with well-assumed hesitation.

“It is—vital!” The voice grew suddenly hoarse as it had over the wire an hour before. “I’ve got to

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see some one in authority here without a moment's delay! The chap I spoke to, if you will be good enough to take me to him."

"Just a minute, Mr. Monckton."

The ticker sounded briefly once more, however, and the fragment of paper which Cliff tore off and laid before his companions bore just five words:

'Shot to pieces, will bolt.'

They had barely read the terse warning when the telephone at Rex's elbow buzzed, and he took the receiver off the hook in order to reply, although Ethel's tones came to them all by means of the dictaphone.

"Mr. Powell, have you an appointment with a Mr. Richard Monckton?"

"If that is the gentleman who telephoned half an hour ago," Rex responded, "I shall be disengaged in a minute. Ask Mr. Monckton to wait and I will ring."

His confrères were familiar with their chief's methods, of which they had spoken, of creating a lightning change in the atmosphere of the consulting room to bring ease and reassurance to their prospective clients, but they were not wholly prepared for the present metamorphosis.

The leather cover was stripped from the table, and upon the ancient wood of its top were placed two colonial candelabra, a pewter tobacco jar and a colossal inkwell of beaten brass; heavy cushions of dull, crimson plush gave the chairs a somewhat churchly dignity and the turn of a knob beside each bookcase

caused a curtain of diaphanous, diamond-checked material to drop between the glass and the rows of volumes within, to give the effect of rich leading. As a note of seeming incongruity, Rex brought from behind the screen of Spanish leather a golf bag, several rifles and an armful of fishing rods, which he stacked in different angles of the panelled wall, and a touch of the switch extinguished the indirect lighting, flooding the room instead with the deep glow of bridge lamps which were hastily brought forward to complete the illusion.

"I fancied so." Lucian nodded reminiscently.

"Colonial relics, modern luxury, golf, hunting, fishing—!" George gazed about him bewilderedly, and Phil Howe demanded:

"Who is this guy, anyway?"

"I think we're ready to receive him now." Rex seemed not to have heard the question. "You boys go into your own rooms and turn on the dictaphones. If there is anything special in any of your lines be ready for the buzzer." He took up the receiver once more. "Miss Jepson, I'll see Mr. Monckton now."

The other panels closed as that leading into the anteroom opened and a young man appeared. He was undeniably good-looking, as Ethel had commented, and his distinguished appearance was heightened not so much by his faultless attire as by the natural poise of the trained athlete, despite the supreme agitation he was obviously trying to control. His blue eyes were well spaced above a short, straight nose and his

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slightly full lips and square, clean-cut jaw were firm, yet now the eyes were blood-shot, and the faint lines beneath them and from nostrils to the corners of the mouth were deeply accentuated. He halted, his gaze sweeping the room, and a look of unconscious gratification and approval displaced for a moment the hunted, harassed expression as he noted the air of quiet luxury and the careless evidence of tastes akin to his own.

Then he turned to Rex and strode forward.

"You are the president of The Showers?"

Rex nodded and waved toward a chair.

"My name is Powell." He stepped to the panel by means of which the new client had entered and drew it almost closed, but a slight gesture invited Ethel to use the narrow aperture as a peephole. Then he returned and seated himself. "Over the telephone you told me that you would be obliged to notify others to-night of the matter which has first brought you to us. Am I right in inferring that you meant the authorities?"

"Yes! I have no choice!" Monckton clenched his hands and the line of his jaw whitened with the tension of the muscles. "You knew that one of your circulars was sent to me last July?"

"I directed that it should be as also to hundreds of others." Rex smiled and bent forward confidentially. "It was not a mere circular, however; it was the proposition of a gentlemen's agreement."

"And I'm going to take you up on it!" Monckton

glanced once more about the room and then straight into the keen eyes across the table. "Your—er—proposition reached me on the eve of my departure for Europe and I tossed it into the nearest drawer of my desk at my bachelor apartment. I returned this afternoon on the 'Tritonia,' slipped through quarantine just before five and it was after six when I reached my rooms. I felt rather at loose ends, coming back after so many months to pick up the threads again and go on, and for the life of me I couldn't help thinking of—my father."

His voice dropped with the last words and a slight tremor passed over his frame. Rex Powell waited and then tactfully prompted him.

"Yes? That is natural, since, if I am correctly informed, you are his only living relative."

"The last of the line. It wasn't necessarily the natural thing for my thoughts to dwell on him under the circumstances, however, for we haven't spoken in six years; that's why I occupied an apartment and he lived all alone in the old family mansion, built long before the Revolution. I seem to be a long time getting to—to the reason for my coming here to-night, but there are some things you must know in order to understand my position. There was nothing secret about our quarrel; all the world knows he wanted me to keep up the old traditions and follow in his path, and I couldn't. I had to go my own way. My father never became reconciled and I hadn't even seen him in six years; but I kept thinking of him to-night

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and the difference there might have been in my homecoming." Again Monckton paused, but after a moment he went on: "I was rummaging in my desk for an old letter when I came across your circular and read it over, then threw it aside. After I'd finished dressing I went to the club and dined, but all during the meal and afterward, when I sat talking with some old acquaintances, I was thinking of the past in the old house, and a longing to see it again came over me. The keys were in my pocket—I've always carried them about with me. They gave me an anchor somehow, if you know what I mean. I knew—I was sure—that the old gentleman would be at the country place up in Pocantico Hills for he went there every March and his habits never changed. I had written from abroad to have my car in readiness the day I landed, and about eleven I broke away from my friends and had it brought around for me. I drove alone up to the old house. You know where it is?"

"Near the upper end of Bronx Park." Rex inclined his head. "It is almost as famous an historical relic as the Jumel mansion. But go on, Mr. Monckton; you went alone, you say. Did you find a caretaker there?"

"No. There wasn't any light except from the street lamps as I drove in the gateway, and that was lost at the turning of the road which led to the house. It was in absolute darkness but I remembered where the light switches were and turned them as I strolled through the rooms on the lower floor. Everything

was in order and just as I remembered it, after six years; and it was strange to be creeping like a thief in the night over the house where I was born and had lived most of my life. That was the actual thought that came to me, Powell, 'like a thief in the night.' Just then I crossed the threshold of the dining-room and turned on the light. The sideboard doors and silver chest were broken open, and two great bundles tied up in tablecloths were on the floor at my feet!"

"You had heard no sound, nothing to indicate there was a burglar in the house?" Rex's tone had quickened.

"Not a thing!" Monckton shook his head. "The state of that room, though, drove all my sentimental recollections out of my head and I dashed for the sideboard to find some sort of a weapon. The drawers had been pretty well rifled but I found a silver-handled nutcracker, short but very heavy, and with that I went through all the lower rooms at the rear, after kicking off my pumps. I found a window forced open in the pantry, but no other trace, and then I rushed to the front of the house again and up the stairs, turning on the lights as I went."

"It didn't occur to you to summon help?" Rex asked.

"No. I wanted to catch the fellow before he got away, forgetting that my presence there wasn't any more welcome than his! It was my house, the house of my people, that was being robbed!" Monckton's

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chin was outthrust in the low glow of the lamps. "In the first room I entered—it had been mine—the drawers of the dresser and lowboy and desk had been broken open and old things of my own were scattered about, personal stuff, that my father had evidently directed should be left undisturbed. It gave me rather a turn but I didn't have time to think of that. I dashed into my father's room, felt for the switch on the wall and then—then as the light blazed up I saw my father! He was lying right at my feet with a great smear of blood on the side of his head, and blood darkening in a pool all about him!"

"He was dead?" It was an exclamation rather than question and Rex straightened.

The young man before him shuddered uncontrollably, and for the first time since beginning his recital he lowered his eyes.

"Yes." His voice was a mere shaken whisper. "I dropped the nutcracker and flung myself down beside him, lifting his head to my knee. I suppose I must have cried out, I don't know, but I realized almost instantly that he was gone. That queer waxen look had spread over his face and he was cold to the touch, and—and the blood was already drying. I'd seen too many men die in action not to know, and I was stunned, incapable of thought, even, at first. There'd been a lot of bitterness between us, every one knows that, but the sight of him struck down wiped it all away and I—I went to pieces for a minute or two.

There wasn't the least change in him except what that last hour must have brought and I could almost hear his voice again in my ears—!"

He broke off and for a moment rested his head on his hand, half covering his eyes, but when he looked up once more they were dry and burning with a feverish intensity, and his tones were stronger as he went on:

"I don't know how long I knelt there with his head on my knees; it seems that it must have been for ages, but I suppose in reality it wasn't more than a minute or two before I remembered the burglar, and laying the body down I sprang up to look for him. Powell, I searched every inch of the house and I'd known it from attic to cellar since I was a boy—every door I couldn't open I broke down myself, and I hunted in every closet and nook and cranny like a madman! I think I would have killed him if I had found him but he had escaped! There wasn't any other indication of his presence, and I had started to go back to the room where my father lay when I saw dark blotches of stains—I'd left footprints of blood from there beside my father! My socks were wet—horrible, and I remembered my old belongings thrown around in my room. I dug out another pair and while I was putting them on the sudden thought struck me of my own position in this awful affair; why, good God, I stood to be accused of my father's murder!"

He fumbled nervously for his handkerchief and

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wiped from his forehead the beads of moisture which had sprung there while Rex Powell watched him closely.

"You are the only one who, as far as it appears, can be proved to have been in that house with your father to-night—or rather, last night, for it is after midnight now," the latter said slowly. "It is known that ill-feeling had existed between you for years, you tell me, and you are his sole relative."

"His heir, you meant to say?" Monckton took a thin platinum case from his pocket and slowly extracted a cigarette. Then his eyes once more met those across the table. "That's it, exactly; the final damning point! Our quarrel was bitter, the definite parting of the ways, but he would never have disowned me. He was proud and I was the last representative of his house; he would never have considered leaving the money and estates to any one else. Every one knew that I knew it, and every one must have guessed or at least suspected long before this that I am desperately in need of a very large sum, more than I could possibly borrow on my own security. When I notify the medical examiner's office or the police, as I must without delay, think of the case which can be built up against me! Motive, opportunity and as for the circumstantial evidence—great heavens! It's absolutely complete! Won't it look to the authorities, to every one, as though I'd trumped up that fact of the burglar, forced open that window myself, and tied up those bundles of silverware after quarreling

with my father and striking him down? I've always been impulsive, with a violent temper; there are many who can testify to that, and recall ugly rows I got into the first few years after I left college. I don't know whether even you can believe me or not, Powell, though I've come here to put myself in your hands, but I swear I didn't do it! I swear I have told you the truth. I never struck that blow!"

The hand holding the cigarette tightened, quivering, and Rex smiled again reassuringly.

"You would be showing rather a poor opinion of our ability if you came to us to find an *imaginary* burglar!" he observed. "That *is* why you have come to us, isn't it?"

"It's my only hope!" Monckton exclaimed hoarsely. "In any case I should not have rested until my father's murderer was found, and I wouldn't have waited for the machinery of the law to punish him! Now it means my own good name, the honor of my family, and perhaps my life! The man must be found!"

CHAPTER III

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

“**W** E don't know yet whether there was one burglar or more, and there are many other points to be considered,” Rex Powell observed. “To discover an ordinary burglar, known in the channels of the underworld, should not be overwhelmingly difficult with the peculiar facilities at our command; but it may take time. Then, too, your own position may not be as serious as you imagine. Did any one know of your sudden decision to visit your old home last night?”

“No, but I was seen and recognized!” Monckton was still fumbling with the cigarette, tapping it upon the case, but his steady gaze on his questioner never wavered. “On the street corner not a hundred yards from our gates there is a little stationery store run by an old man who has been there ever since I can remember. He delivers our papers and he was standing outside last night and hailed me as I drove past. I waved my hand to him.”

Rex frowned.

“We have not a moment to lose, then. That was a detail you did not tell me, and there may be others you have overlooked. I want you to meet my col-

leagues and repeat your story to them so that we may take immediate steps to protect you."

He pressed the row of buttons beneath the edge of the table, and as the others filed in he presented them and briefly reviewed the case to which they had already listened.

"Mr. Monckton, was your father in the habit, when he went to his country place, of employing a caretaker or private watchman for the town house?" George Roper asked, when they had heard his account with attention.

"Always. Sam Haskell was our watchman for more than thirty years, but he died a few months after my break with my father, and I don't know that he was replaced. With the development of the park many more police have been added in our neighborhood." Monckton shifted his gaze to George. "I confess when the impulse came to me to go to the old house I never thought of the possibility of encountering a caretaker."

"You say there were no lights from the house as you drove in the gateway; the gates were open, then?" pursued the cross-examiner of the firm. "Didn't you think that strange, with no one in residence?"

"No; I just didn't think of it one way or another," Monckton confessed. "I must have been in a trance, and my thoughts were only on the past until the moment when I entered the looted dining-room. If this seems odd to you, how will the authorities look at it?"

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"We are taking that into consideration," George assured him.

"Did you examine that forced window closely?" Phil Howe asked in his turn.

"Only enough to see that a pane of glass had been cut out and the latch opened," replied Monckton.

"There are no special means taken to prevent burglary? No alarm system?"

"None. My father thought that sort of thing was nonsense. He was averse to change, to modern innovations. The telephone and electric light were concessions on his part."

"Ah, the telephone!" Clifford Nichols interjected. "You called us up from the house, then?"

"From the room where my father lay dead." Monckton's voice was lowered once more. "When I realized the position in which I stood the horror of it overwhelmed me! My intention had been, of course, to raise an alarm at once when I had satisfied myself that the murderer had escaped, but when I saw what it might mean to me I didn't know what to do! I wanted advice, help, but my best friend, Britton Langhorne, is exploring in Africa and I have few other intimates—none I could consult in such a frightful emergency. Then I thought of you and that announcement I'd come across earlier in the evening at my own rooms. It seemed to be my only chance and luckily I recalled your name. I hurried back into my father's room and called you, then I turned out the light, locked the door and—"

“Wait a minute,” Henry Corliss interrupted. “There were no other wounds on the body except the one on the side of the head?”

“None that I saw, but that had been more than enough to—to kill him!” Monckton shuddered and passed his hand over his eyes. “I should say that he died instantly. His temple seemed to be crushed in!”

“Didn’t you notice any weapon lying around? Any short, heavy, blunt instrument—?” Henry broke off and then demanded sharply: “What became of that nutcracker you took from the dining-room? You said you dropped it when you knelt down to lift your father’s head—”

“Yes! I never thought of it again!” Monckton exclaimed. “I see what you mean! It was heavy enough to have caused that wound—God! If it’s found—!”

He started up but Rex stopped him with a gesture.

“It is quite as likely to count in your favor, in helping to substantiate your story. Draw the attention of the authorities to it yourself when the disclosure is made, but not in such a marked manner that it will seem like part of the plant,” he directed, glancing at the others for their approval. “The burglar could hardly have been supposed to carry it with him from the dining-room, and it would be too risky for you to attempt to clean and replace it now or to conceal it if there happen to be bloodstains on it. Absolute frankness is your safest play.”

“You’re sure there was no other clew that you might

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not have been conscious of noting?" Lucian Baynes spoke for the first time.

"None!" Monckton shook his head, and then he gave a quick start. "There *was* something that struck me as odd for the moment, but it couldn't have had any connection—! It can't be that the murderer used the telephone!"

"What is it?" Rex Powell demanded. "Was there blood on it?"

"Not that, but there was something written on the wall beside it—a series of four figures, some telephone number, evidently. I noticed it as I hung up the receiver after calling you," Monckton replied slowly, in a dazed fashion, as though he were striving to recall the circumstances in every detail. "My father preferred a wall instrument to the movable type and the extension was so installed in his room. The paper there is a plain light gray, and the writing had been done with a soft pencil. What were those figures? If I could only remember them! I know the number was one that I didn't recognize and no central exchange had been put down after it. It was nine, nine—no, that was at the end! Ah, I have it now! Six-o-nine-nine! I can see it as plainly as though it were before me again!"

"Was the hand in which they were written familiar to you?" Clifford Nichols asked eagerly. "Can you recall the formation of the numbers and describe them?"

"I think so." Monckton's forehead wrinkled.

“They were scrawled in a peculiar, aimless hand with open loops and wavering downstrokes. The two in the middle were almost overlapping, the end ones widely spaced and all four straggled downward in an uneven line; but the pencil had been pressed so sharply into the wall that it had made indentations and scratched the paper and at the last stroke I seem to remember a deep gouge and splutter of dots as though the lead had broken short off. I can’t imagine why it made such an impression on me; it never entered my mind that the murderer might have written the numbers there; but I wondered who did, for my father would not have done such a slovenly thing. No one else ever went into his room except Jim Ricks, his valet, and the chambermaid, and neither of them would have used his telephone; the main instrument is down in the hall, in the stair closet which is arranged as a booth. Do you think it could possibly have been the burglar?”

He looked again at Rex, who shrugged.

“We have no way of telling until that call is traced and it won’t be an easy matter without the exchange.—Now, Mr. Monckton, we’ve got to be prepared to meet any accusation which may be made and so we must know the weakness and strength of the possible case against you. You must be absolutely frank with us or we can do nothing.”

“I am only too anxious, as I told you, to place myself unreservedly in your hands!” the new client declared.

"You spoke before of being in serious financial difficulties," Rex resumed. "Please tell us exactly what these difficulties are and why it is generally known?"

"To do that I'd better go back to the quarrel with my father, though it's indescribably painful for me to speak of it now." His voice trembled slightly again as he went on: "Frankly, although I am deeply shocked and grieved, I can't pretend that my sorrow is as deep as it would be if we had been more congenial. My father was a splendid character in every way and it is a reflection on me that from my earliest recollections we have been diametrically opposed to each other. Our tastes and views and sense of values—why, we never even thought alike! It was natural that he should have lived in the past and its traditions, particularly as he grew older, but I am of the present day and we always clashed. There was no open rupture, just a continual, steady widening of the breach.

"My family have been bankers since the first de Puyster Monckton, kinsman of Robert Monckton the English Colonial Governor, loaned capital and ran accounts for the Dutch settlers, and our private banking house is now one of the foremost in the city. My father expected me to carry on with it after him as a matter of course; I knew that from boyhood, and I was resolved not to tell him until the time came that I could not accede to his wishes. It was a pity when the institution had been maintained in a straight line from father to son for all those generations; but such a career was abhorrent to me and I was utterly incap-

able of assuming a life task for which I had no inclination. Every instinct in me rebelled at being a figurehead, chained to a desk, when I craved adventure, chance! When I graduated from the university the question arose, but I put it off by pleading for a year or two of travel. Africa, the far north, the upper reaches of the Amazon—I explored for two years while my father waited, and then the show-down came.

“There wasn’t any undignified row but it was all the more bitter because of that; a definite, absolute parting of the ways. I never even saw my father again until he lay at my feet last night!”

“It was then, after the quarrel, that you entered Wall Street?” Rex asked.

“Yes. My inheritance from my mother paid for my seat on the Exchange and left sufficient capital to speculate on a safe margin; but I’ve always been a bit of a gambler and last year I plunged—and lost heavily. It’s no secret on the Street that I was close to the wall when last summer I went abroad to try to form a partnership with a house on the Bourse. I was unsuccessful, after all these months, in the coup I had planned; and I sailed for home this week, knowing ruin stared me in the face—and every one else knows it! Nothing but a miracle could have saved me—or a tragedy, like this!”

“You are certain, then, that you are your father’s heir?” George Roper took up the interrogation.

“There isn’t a shadow of doubt! He looked on

speculation as a particularly vulgar form of gambling, and he may have left his money in trust but unquestionably for my benefit. I would rather have died myself than touch a penny of it!" Monckton groaned. "I would do anything in the world, anything, to bring my father back!"

His tone rang with anguish and for a minute there was a pause. Then Rex remarked:

"It is a great disadvantage that we cannot be first on the scene but we must defer to the authorities. You say that after 'phoning to us you turned out the light in your father's room and locked the door?"

"Yes. I've brought the key with me; it was in the door, on the outside. I descended, switching out the lights as I went, put on my pumps in the dining-room and left the house immediately to drive down here."

"You didn't go the same way? It was late, but is there a chance that the old newspaper man saw you again?" Henry Corliss asked anxiously.

"No. I turned south instead of rounding the block to the north as I left the gates and I don't remember passing any one till I got on upper Broadway and then only a few motor cars and belated trucks. I drove as fast as I could without being arrested. Now, what do you advise me to do?"

"Return at once to the house, but drive slowly enough to avoid attention and take a roundabout way. If you had not been seen in the first place we could provide a different story for you, but it is too late now. It was about eleven o'clock when you left the club?"

“Possibly a few minutes before. I discovered my father’s body almost at once and it could not have been quite twelve when I telephoned to you.”

“It’s nearly one now.” Phil glanced at the ornate white gold wrist watch which he had purchased from his honest earnings as a member of The Shadows. “Suppose the dicks do pull you in, how are you going to account for us when we get busy?”

Monckton looked again at Rex, who said quickly.

“Whether you are accused or not, Mr. Monckton, get in immediate touch with your attorney, after the authorities have taken charge, and tell him that you have privately retained us to find the murderer of your father; he must arrange for us to have access to the house and full opportunity to investigate as we please. One of us will be here until morning, when another will take his turn, and you can place every confidence in the young woman in the outer office who received you, at any time. If you should be held in connection with your father’s death, instruct your attorney to communicate with us at once; or you may ’phone us in the presence of the authorities and engage us to investigate the case for you as though there had been no previous arrangement with us. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly. My attorney is Grosvenor Hood, junior partner of Lyman and Hood, you know. They are not—criminal lawyers, but they will, of course, arrange for associate counsel if necessary.” Monckton winced as he spoke, adding: “I can see you take it

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almost as a foregone conclusion, that I shall be accused and I am prepared for it. Gentlemen, you believe in me? In spite of appearances and the weakness of what I have told you, you don't think me guilty of this hideous thing?"

"We would not be willing to jeopardize our professional reputation by accepting your case if we were not absolutely assured you had told us the truth," Rex responded gravely. "You are right, however; the surest, the only way to dispel the slightest doubt which may linger in the minds of every one is to find the murderer and prove his crime. It will be necessary, of course, for you to change your story in one detail, in order to account for this lapse of time. You reached your home, then, a minute or two after greeting your old tradesman and wandered through the lower floor of the house until you came to the library. There is an exceptionally fine one there, I have heard."

Monckton nodded.

"It is considered a notable one. The collection has been added to from one generation to another."

"Well, you browsed over the books until now, never dreaming that any one else was under the same roof," Rex continued. "Then you were thirsty and went to the dining-room, finding there the indications of an interrupted robbery. From then on your story is the strict truth; after discovering the body and searching the house you became conscious of the stains on your socks and, in horrified repulsion, you changed them for a fresh, old pair and then called up police

headquarters. Do so, the moment you reach the house now, be careful to put your pumps in the dining-room again. You may say that you rushed in a frenzy all over the house and downstairs once more before summoning them; that will account for extra footprints of yours in the dust that must have collected if the house has been closed for several weeks. That is all, now, but don't delay. We will have further directions for you at our next conference."

"The—the fees and expenses—?" Monckton began as he rose, but Rex waved the suggestion aside.

"That can all be arranged with your attorney. We will take no active part until we hear from you again."

When their new client, courageously resolved to face the issue, had taken his departure George Roper glanced about at the others.

"What do you really think of Mr. Richard Monckton?" he asked. "On one point at least he has not been frank with us; why did he go to that house last night?"

CHAPTER IV

THE SHADOWS DECIDE

“**H**OLY CAT!” Phil Howe stared. “You don’t think he could have heard the old man was there and gone to have it out with him? He must have been pretty desperate, on the brink of going to the wall—”

“Hold on, boys,” Henry Corliss warned. “Why didn’t you ask him straight out, if you didn’t believe him, George? We’re going to make a hard job twice as hard, by beginning to doubt him, and it looks as though we’d have our work cut out for us as it is!”

Cliff Nichols and Lucian Baynes drew nearer together.

“It would have been a daring move for him to come to us if he had trumped up that story and fixed the evidence,” the former murmured. “He’d be taking a big chance, but he said he had always been a gambler.”

Lucian shook his head.

“It would have been more than a daring move on his part. It would amount to sheer brilliancy, and that I don’t think our young friend is capable of. He used poor judgment on the Street or he wouldn’t be in a hole now, for he hasn’t been caught in any squeeze. He was quick enough to grasp his position, but he has

a single-track mind and when he realized the full extent of his predicament he could only think of getting help."

"We're wasting time," Rex announced shortly. "I'm going to send Ethel home now, but first let's have her opinion; we've found it illuminating before this. Ethel!"

The panel was pushed farther aside and a smooth blonde head appeared in the aperture.

"Yes, Mr. Powell?" Her blue eyes were dancing. "It's a whale of a case, isn't it?"

"It is." He soberly repressed a twinkle at her lapse into the vernacular. "Sit down. I'm going to send you home in a minute to get some sleep, for we want you back here bright and early in the morning; but first we'd like to know what you think of Mr. Monckton."

"Well, he belongs." She settled herself in her chair with a quick little nod. "I knew that when he came and I wasn't suprised when he spoke of the generations back of him. He had a terrible homecoming, didn't he? Facing failure and then finding his father murdered like that!"

The Shadows glanced at each other and then Henry asked:

"What do you suppose he would have done if the old shopkeeper had not recognized him?"

"Just what he did do!" Ethel Jepson replied promptly. "He mightn't have realized so quickly what he was up against, himself, but even if he called the

police first he'd have come to us sooner or later. Finding that circular again made us stick in the back of his mind and he couldn't get here quick enough."

"His story sounded straight to you then, my child?" George Roper leaned forward. "Did it strike you that he'd added any details to it for our benefit? Do you think he told everything exactly as it happened?"

Ethel laughed.

"Added to it?" she echoed. Her face grew grave once more and she shook her head. "No. I imagine he left out quite a little—about himself, I mean. Of course, it won't help to find who killed his father, but I'd like to know what he's done the last few years besides lose money in the stock market."

"He belongs to all the good clubs, town and country." Rex's eyes narrowed. "He goes with the right people though he doesn't appear to devote himself to society; his name appears only at the larger functions. He's an opera subscriber but I don't think he aspires to be a patron of any of the arts, and I never heard of his being interested in politics to any extent."

"That's what I mean." Ethel nodded again. "We know what he doesn't do, but not what he does."

"I think he has been absorbed in business. What are you getting around to, Ethel?"

"What he didn't tell us!" A faint reminder of the old, impish grin wreathed her lips for an instant. "He felt lonesome and blue and sentimental when he landed, didn't he? He was hunting for an old letter

when he came across our circular; I wonder who that letter was from?"

"By Jove!" Lucian Baynes ejaculated under his breath. "Of course it hasn't anything to do with the murder, as you say, but it's curious none of us thought of that!"

"Memories took him back to the old house, too, though he hadn't set foot in it for six years; but they weren't memories of any boyhood business!" pursued Ethel. "If his father was killed by a burglar, well and good; but what if it was a different sort of person his father surprised there, who killed him and then planted that fake robbery evidence? He may suspect somebody and not have any idea how to bring it home to him. He was telling the truth, though; there isn't any question of that!"

"How do you know?" Rex Powell demanded.

"I don't!" she retorted. "It's just some more of that intuition I was talking about before, I guess. Did you ever notice that, when a person is trying to put something over and act perfectly at ease, they always try to do a dozen things at once and their eyes travel a mile a minute? They fiddle with their cuffs or tie, or the arms of the chair, and smoke and cough and change color, and never look you straight in the eye. He never took his off you when he was telling his story first, and he helped himself to a cigarette without even being conscious of it. I noticed that because he didn't smoke it, though the matches were right in front of him here on the table; he only twisted

it in his fingers and tapped it on the case, and then he dropped it. See! It's there now, by Mr. Corliss!"

She reached forward and picked up the slender, monogrammed cigarette. It was bent and the tobacco spilled from each end.

"He was in such dead earnest that, after you called in the others and they began questioning him, he looked straight at each one as they spoke. He had just one thing on his mind—to tell the truth and make you believe it and help him!"

Cliff Nichols stirred impatiently.

"But the writing—the writing on the wall!" he exclaimed. "What did you make of that?"

"A lot—or nothing," Ethel replied enigmatically. "If it can't be traced to one of the servants, I know what I'd do! I'd call up six-o-nine-nine at every exchange in the city and suburbs, and find out what's at the other end of the line! Whoever wrote it there didn't do it for fun; it was given to them over the 'phone and they put it down so that they wouldn't forget it. There's something else, too; you don't mind?"

She had turned once more to Rex and he responded with a smile:

"We asked you to tell us what you thought, you know."

"Well, I was wondering what the old man himself was doing there, all alone without even a servant, in the middle of the night, when he was supposed to be at his country place, and you heard Mr. Monckton say

his father's habits didn't change. I'll run along home now, or Mrs. Gorham will think I'm lost!"

She rose, but George Roper halted her on her way to the anteroom.

"Wait a minute, Ethel. What did you mean about the letter he was looking for and the memories that took him back to his father's house?"

"He lives in bachelor apartments and you haven't said he was married, so I was wondering who the lady was. He's too good-looking not to be run after, besides being young and with all that family back of him, to say nothing of the money everybody seems to know he would have inherited some day. There's bound to be somebody he is crazy about; he looks like the kind one woman or another would always be fussing over. He told you to find the murderer; but if I were you, I'd find the woman who is crazy about him and have a little talk with her. Well, I'll get Wee Sing and trot along. I—I'm awfully glad you wanted me to come back!"

When she had gone George gazed solemnly around the table.

"What did I tell you? Not a thing gets by those round innocent eyes of hers, nor that quick brain! She's got the psychology of Monckton's attitude down pat and I'm inclined to believe she's right. There's a lot to this case, that only mighty clever handling will bring to light; a lot more than just looking up a stray thug, and I flatter myself that I'm the one to tackle it. I'll take charge of the investigation—"

“Huh!” Phil Howe snorted in high dudgeon. “It don’t matter what the old guy was doing alone in that house, nor what took his son there, nor how many skirts he was chasing in society, or out of it! The father *was* there, he was croaked, and the evidence left lying around was too good to have been framed by anybody who hadn’t pulled off real jobs. The guy was clumsy and a dirty rat, to bash the old man’s head in when he lost his nerve and took his hand off his number, but he was a crook, all right, and I’m the baby to bring him in. When we first started this graft I vowed I wouldn’t snitch on any of my own kind and help to send them up, but this guy’s yellow and he don’t belong. I’d like to put him away myself and when I get him—!”

“How are you going to do that?” Cliff sneered. “He left only one clew behind him—those numbers scrawled on the wall, and if it isn’t my case on the very face of it—!”

“Your case!” Henry Corliss turned his chair. “It’s murder, ain’t it, no matter who did it, and murder’s my job! I’d like to know where you boys get off, anyway!”

“It was a murder, yes, my dear Henry,” Lucian drawled. “Murder, because of an interrupted robbery. Has it occurred to your minds that the silverware may be a blind to cover the theft of some rare object of great value? De Puyster Monckton was a millionaire. That old, pre-revolutionary mansion may hold priceless treasure in the way of historic

relics and I ask you if any one is more fitted to assume the leadership in this case than I—?”

“I had thought of directing the investigation myself,” Rex remarked. “I’ve worked with each one of you at some time or other and this has so many aspects—”

“My sainted aunt!” Cliff exclaimed. “You’re all right, Rex, and you’ve always played square and used good judgment, but I ask you if you consider yourself a handwriting expert? That’s what the affair simmers down to—an analysis of those figures written—”

“A mere minor detail!” George interrupted in his turn. “When you’ve doped out his character and the color of his eyes, are you any nearer to finding him, provided the man who put down that number was the murderer?”

“It takes more than a handwriting expert, my dear Clifford!” Lucian turned to him. “De Puyster Monckton was not killed for a mere armful of old silverware!”

Phil flung himself out of his chair.

“It’s robbery! Robbery!” he cried. “You guys are all trying to horn in on my game! There’s no art bunk about this, just a plain crook turned killer in a tight pinch!”

“It’s murder!” Henry’s small eyes reddened. “What did I join you fellows for, anyway? We were each to stick to our own line, that was the agreement when we started. The Shadows, and each of us was

to take complete charge of the cases that belonged to his department with the others working under him. First and foremost, this is a death under mysterious circumstances, to say the least, and it's my meat!"

"The fact of the murder itself and the direct cause of death is plain enough, Henry." Rex shook his head. "It's an interesting problem, with possibilities that appeal to all of us, but I'm not going to retreat from my position. We don't want to fail now and frankly I believe that I am the only one unprejudiced enough to look at this from all its angles—"

"Listen to me, all of you!" Cliff rose and faced the semi-circle of flushed, angry countenances. "It's a case of murder, yes, and presumably murder by a thief caught in the act. With that as a working hypothesis, what have we to go on? There's just one clew to the murderer, his handwriting! The handwriting on the wall! There's a fine old name at stake, and the honor, perhaps the life, of the last of the line, but more than that there's a killer loose in the world! The only way to reach him is through the evidence left by his own hand. There's no question of it—he used the 'phone and wrote down those figures and it's that alone that will put him in our hands! I'm as jealous of our success as Rex or any of you and I'm not looking for power or dictatorship; I sat back with Rex and George while Lucian, then Phil, and then Henry, each took charge of a case and brought it to a brilliant conclusion; and I worked under orders as cheerfully and faithfully as any of the rest, but now

it is my turn! This whole mystery hinges on *handwriting* and I ask that you give it to me!"

His eyes were glowing with an eager light, his sensitive face working uncontrollably and he paused, waiting. Then in the silence that followed his appeal the telephone sounded like a sharp note of warning.

Rex sprang to reply to it and Monckton's voice came over the wire.

"The Shadows? Powell?—I've just reached the house, and the 'phone was ringing as I entered the door!"

"The 'phone!" Rex echoed. "You didn't answer it?"

"No, I waited until it stopped, to call you. It was the extension in my father's room! Great God, do you know what it means? The house has been closed, every one knows that! That fellow must have used the telephone after all, and the other party is trying to ring him back! The party who gave him that number he wrote on the wall! What shall I do?"

"Call up headquarters now! Now, do you hear? Carry out our instructions! Notify them at once!"

He jammed the receiver on its hook and turned to the others.

"Gentlemen, Cliff is right. It is a handwriting case, after all, and he alone can solve it. Clifford, The Shadows are at your service!"

CHAPTER V

CLIFFORD IN COMMAND

THE streets had just begun to teem and clatter with the day's business, when Ethel Jepson entered the office of The Shadowers, fresh and blooming in her chic little blue hat and frock, with a delicately glowing mass of sweet peas at her belt, to soften its trim severity.

Some sixth sense warned her that she was not alone in the suite, and she moved to the panel at her left, which opened into George Roper's séance chamber, and pushed it softly aside.

There on the low Turkish divan, with a gorgeous mandarin robe thrown over his feet, lay Rex Powell. His coat and collar had been removed, and the shirt-band turned in at the neck revealed the strong, straight lines of his throat, while his face in repose bore an almost boyish expression that smoothed away the lines, few but inevitable, which the lawless years had graven there.

Ethel eyed him wistfully for a moment then tiptoed out and through the empty laboratory on the right of her desk into Clifford's windowless study. He was bending over the table under a strong light, absorbed in a great volume filled with rows of figures varyingly spaced and of widely differing character,

and he looked up with a wearily drawn smile, although his eyes still burned with an undiminished light.

"Is it morning already?" he asked.

"Nearly nine o'clock," Ethel nodded. "Did anything more happen after I went home?"

"No. It looks as though our client's fears had been confirmed. That's why Rex stayed here all night. He's asleep now in George's room."

"I know. I saw him just now." She turned but paused. "I thought Mr. Powell said for him to call up here at once if he was arrested."

"Or have his attorney come to us, and I fancy he thought that best; we ought to hear from him any minute." Cliff Nichols replaced the volume on the shelf and took down another. "I'm taking charge of this case, Ethel."

"Oh, because of those figures written up beside the 'phone?" Her eyes widened. "Will you have something for me to do, Mr. Nichols? I'll never try to take things into my own hands again, truly I won't, and I might be able to find a trace of that burglar if I went back to Lefty Jane—"

"Never that!" Cliff replied quickly. "I don't know yet whether there will be any way you can help or not, but it won't be by going back! You're through with all that!"

"I wouldn't mind—there's the 'phone, now!" Ethel hurried to her desk and took up the receiver. A dignified voice inquired if that were the office of The Shadows and, on her eager response, announced

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himself as Grosvenor Hood, the attorney for Mr. Richard Monckton, asking how soon he could hope to see Mr. Powell.

"Right away, if you like," Ethel replied. "He is here now."

"I shall be there in five minutes." The gravely measured voice ceased and the connection was rung off, while Ethel turned to find Rex standing just behind her.

"Grosvenor Hood?"

"Yes. He's coming right around. They must have pinched—arrested Mr. Monckton. Oh, please get Mr. Nichols to let me help!"

Rex Powell smiled.

"He must use his own judgment, my dear; it is up to him now. Our hands are all tied until we have seen Mr. Hood."

The latter appeared almost on the heels of his message. He was a man of middle age and commanding presence. It was evident that he had dressed in some haste, and he bore a shocked, almost dazed expression.

"Mr. Powell?" He extended a long, well-shaped hand when Ethel had ushered him into the consulting room which had now been restored to its normal appearance. "My client, Mr. Monckton, assures me that he has already acquainted you with the circumstances which bring me here."

"Not with the further developments." Rex waved

to a chair. "I infer that the authorities have taken the step we anticipated?"

"They are holding Mr. Monckton as a material witness but that is of course only preliminary to arraigning him for indictment. It is a grievous mistake but natural enough under the circumstances. Mr. Powell, we must prevent the indictment at all costs!"

"That can only be done by finding the murderer. You have made arrangements for us to have access to the house?" asked Rex.

"Yes. The police have been informed that you are investigating the tragedy on behalf of my client but they regard it merely as a gesture on our part. I myself have been all over the house and there is no sign of the weapon, no possible clew, unless you consider those figures scrawled on the wall may be an indication. Personally, I don't believe they were made by the murderer; it is inconceivable that he could have had the temerity to use the telephone either before or after he killed Mr. de Puyster Monckton. I have come to offer you any help in my power and to tell you that any fee you may name will be satisfactory to my client. He has asked me to place this at your disposal for temporary expenses and you have only to let me know when more is needed."

He laid a check before Rex, and the latter smiled slightly as he glanced at its figures.

"This will be more than sufficient, I think, Mr. Hood." He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me a

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little about the Moncktons, father and son.—But first let me introduce a colleague of mine. The others will be here later.”

He pressed the buzzer and when Cliff Nichols appeared, presented him, adding:

“Mr. Hood was about to tell me something of our client. Not the family history, of course, that is well known, but his affairs during the last few years.”

“Really, I fail to see that they can have any bearing on your investigation!” the attorney remarked stiffly. “Mr. Monckton has already told you of the estrangement which existed between him and his father, I understand.”

“Mr. Hood, we must judge what data will be important to our work, and you have offered to help us.” Rex Powell’s tone was firm. “You knew the elder Mr. Monckton?”

“Very well indeed. He was a splendid character, a gentleman of the old school, genial and a perfect host. In former years he was noted as an after-dinner speaker. The misunderstanding between him and his son was unfortunate, but inevitable with their warring temperaments. My client is impetuous and of a restless, roving disposition. He could never have settled to a career as a banker, and I think his father realized it in these later years.”

“You saw him after the quarrel?”

“Yes, I was a frequent guest at his house.” Mr. Hood had evidently resigned himself to the discussion and he went on: “Mr. Monckton knew, of course,

that I was his son's attorney but that made no difference in our friendship. Indeed he never mentioned the fact and his son's name was not uttered in his presence to my knowledge during these six years, yet I am aware that he kept himself informed of his son's general affairs—financially, I mean."

"They are in a crucial state, we gathered," Cliff remarked. "This fact cannot be concealed from the police?"

"Unfortunately, no. They will have access to his books, and will undoubtedly play it up strongly as a motive." The attorney shook his head. "According to them, the case is an open-and-shut one."

"All the better for us, since they will not be likely to interfere or follow our movements too closely." Rex smiled again. "Mr. Monckton spoke himself of his impulsiveness and said many could testify to it. He recalled ugly rows he got into during the first few years after he left college. What was the nature of these rows, Mr. Hood? We must ascertain if Mr. Monckton had any active enemies."

"No active ones, I am sure, although that has nothing to do with the tragedy." The note of aloofness sounded again in Hood's voice. "He is the type that people either like or dislike heartily, but he has many friends, more than the average man."

"And those 'rows'?" Rex Powell persisted. "Was there any scandal attached to them?"

"Women, you mean?" The attorney raised his heavy brows. "The name of none was publicly men-

tioned, but it was generally understood when he thrashed young Chester Norcross that it was because of the boy's inexcusable advances to an actress, a most estimable person, I believe."

"Who was this actress?"

The attorney's lips tightened.

"This old gossip is utterly foreign to your purpose, gentlemen, but since you insist it was Edith Ledingham. My client was not at all interested, in fact he was then engaged to young Norcross' sister and the fact that the affair was broken by mutual consent shortly thereafter lent color to the story. There was no other suggestion of that nature in connection with the later difficulties to which Mr. Monckton must have referred. One took place at a country club, a most regrettable incident, and another following a polo match, but neither reflected upon him save as being almost quixotically imprudent. He has matured greatly in the last six years."

"Chester Norcross." Rex glanced sidelong at Cliff. "You are referring to Wilmette Norcross' son? He has been in several other escapades, if I remember rightly. As you say, however, these matters are beside the point. Mr. Monckton told us that you do not handle criminal cases, but believed that you would call in an associate council."

"The best in America, if it becomes necessary, but we look to you to obviate that. It will not be enough to have Mr. Monckton released; he must be cleared beyond the peradventure of a doubt and the identity

of the real murderer established. The body has been removed for the autopsy, but it will later be sent to Pocantico Hills and the funeral will take place from there. Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"Did the thief take anything with him from the house?" asked Cliff Nichols. "Has an inventory been made?"

"Not a complete one," replied Hood. "This cannot be done until the housekeeper, Mrs. Miller, arrives from the country estate. She has been sent for, together with the butler and the late Mr. Monckton's valet; they should get here during the morning."

"Mr. Hood"—Cliff Nichols leaned forward—"has it been ascertained yet why Mr. Monckton came to New York and when?"

"Yes. I have had the butler and then Mrs. Miller on the 'phone and both gave me the same information; that Mr. Monckton announced his intention yesterday morning of coming to the city, and the coachman drove him to the station to take the eleven-ten train. He disliked motor cars and never used one, except in an emergency, although he kept two and a station wagon for his guests. He said he might not return till to-day—Friday, and that is the last that was known."

"Are there any guests now at the country place?"

"At Monckton Manor? None at the moment, but I believe quite a house party was to have been given over the week-end." The attorney appeared to be growing more and more impatient, and now he voiced

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a protest. "Mr. Nichols, may I remind you that every moment is precious—?"

"Suppose we agree to expedite matters by eliminating further argument?" Cliff suggested smoothly, and at the other's shrug he continued: "Did Mr. Monckton entertain many house guests in town?"

"Rarely, during the last six years at any rate. He gave formal dinners and received intimates for an evening now and then; that is all."

"In that case I shall want a list of all those who have visited Monckton Manor since he went there last month, together with the maids, valets and chauffeurs they may have brought with them," Cliff observed. "I would suggest also that you have a talk with the authorities and diplomatically plant a seed of caution, so that they will postpone the arraignment of Mr. Richard Monckton, for a short time at least, on the suspicion that you may have important information to disprove their theory after all. You have not told us what brought the elder Mr. Monckton to the city yesterday."

"I do not know. The servants could not tell me. I will obtain the lists for you as soon as possible. Can I tell you anything more?" He glanced from one to the other of them, and Rex Powell shook his head slightly.

Cliff rose.

"Not at the present time, and we won't detain you any longer. You will be found at your office at any time?"

“Or my home or club; here are the 'phone numbers.” Hood took a card from his case, wrote hastily upon it and handed it over, together with a handful of papers. “These are your passes for the town house and I have arranged for any members of your organization to see Mr. Monckton in the Tombs during the customary visiting hours. I need not tell you, gentlemen, that this has been an indescribable shock to me and I shall anxiously await word from you.” He bowed formally.

Cliff Nichols showed him to the door and when he reëntered he was carrying a telephone book.

“Rex, we haven't any time to lose now. I'm going up to have a look at the Monckton house, and in the meantime I'd like to have you call up number '6099' at every exchange in Greater New York. Ask for any fictitious person and ascertain what the address is, and whether it's a home or business, house-wire or private. Get Ethel to help you, if you like, and the others also when they come in, and tell them to keep careful note of those where any reluctance is shown in giving the address and name. Then send Henry down to the mortuary to have a look at the body and obtain a report on the autopsy, if it's been performed, and tell George and Phil to join me in an hour. I'll want Lucian to scout around among any society people who know him as 'Lester Ballantyne,' the art connoisseur, and see if he can get line on the Norcross family, particularly the sister Richard was engaged to, and you—well, would you object to try-

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ing to pick up what gossip you can about our client and his friends?"

He asked the question somewhat diffidently, knowing that under the name which was their leader's birthright, yet never mentioned to The Shadows, Rex Powell sometimes made excursions into the world which had known him before he turned to the dark, if alluring, byways of crime. He respected the latter's reticence, yet before this Rex had been willing to bridge the chasm in the interest of a client, and now he nodded, smiling.

"I understand. You remember Ormsby, who helped us out in that sanitarium affair? I'll take him to lunch and I won't even have to mention our client, for the news of the murder and his arrest will be in all the papers by then. When shall we all report?"

"This afternoon, and here. What do you think of our friend Hood?"

"If you want my honest opinion, he'd give the best of his practice to be well out of this, and he would wash his hands of the case in a minute if he could do it gracefully. As it is, we will probably be introduced shortly to an associate who handles criminal cases and Hood himself will retire as far into the background as he can."

"Meaning—?" Cliff Nichols asked as Rex paused, and the latter shrugged.

"I think he is not at all sure that the police have made a mistake."

"And neither are you!" Cliff retorted in disgust.

“Why, even Ethel could see that young Monckton was telling the truth!”

“But not all of it!” Rex reminded him. “She is a mere girl, after all, and impressionable; Monckton’s good looks and personality appealed to her, she admitted as much, and she’s prejudiced in his favor; but even that didn’t prevent her from noting the gaps in his story.”

“Changing your mind about our little secretary, too, eh?” Cliff remarked innocently. “Beginning to see that she isn’t lacking in romance and the qualities of the eternal feminine, after all? I did think at first the evidence of the burglar would be ingenious, if it had been a frame-up, but I see now that it could have been nothing but actual fact. Well, I’m off. Don’t forget to call up those numbers.”

The historic Monckton mansion was a huge old pile of gray stone and stout timbers, built in the square, compact style of the early Colonial period. Its great white pillars gleamed through the bright spring foliage as Cliff’s taxi turned in between the high gateposts and scudded up the winding graveled driveway to the wide porch.

A number of bluecoats and plain-clothes men were patrolling the grounds, and a group of them, gathered on the shallow steps, separated and eyed Cliff curiously when he descended. A little of the old, hunted fear clutched at his heart, for less than a year ago he had been behind bars, serving the last of a two-year sentence because of a slight misunderstanding

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about a check. Would any of these flatties spot him? Would they wonder what an ex-forgery was doing in the guise of a private detective, and summarily escort him down to headquarters to explain?

But with only a slight pallor marking his inward agitation he dismissed the taxi, and walking boldly up to the guardian of the door he presented his pass.

"Shadows, eh?" The plain-clothes man's heavy features lightened with a derisive smile. "We ain't run up against your outfit before, and you've sure got the short end of it this time! It's all over but the shooting!"

"So I've heard." Cliff smiled broadly with relief, for there was no recognition in the man's manner and only covert amusement in that of the others. "Got to give a client his money's worth, however; that's what we're in business for."

"Good enough!" the detective laughed. "Squeeze him for all the mouthpiece don't get! Go to it—you'll find 'shadows' in there and precious little else!"

He threw open the door and Cliff Nichols passed into the wide hall, ghostly in its summer floor-covering of white linen, with shrouded furniture and netting-swathed pictures and chandeliers. He saw a huge drawing-room and library on one side and across from them a vast room with an unbroken floor space gleaming like satin. Rows of slim Sheraton chairs were placed stiffly against walls that were lined with great mirrors interspaced with candelabra, and overhead

three enormous, cut-crystal chandeliers hung from a painted ceiling.

Stately minuets had been tripped here by feet which had been dust now for a century or more, and, later, Virginia Reels had been in turn supplanted by the dignified waltzes of the Seventies, but surely jazz had never echoed profanely in these walls! Cliff could have lingered indefinitely, his sensitive soul alive to the influences of the past, but the sight of a figure in uniform, before a door further down the hall, called him sharply back to the present and his errand.

Upon his brief explanation the officer stood aside and he entered a dining-room large enough for a banquet hall; but the drawers and doors of the rich antique mahogany sideboard sagged open, and the lid of the chest at one side of the fireplace had been twisted almost off its heavy brass hinges. Silver bowls, porringers and ewers with a cascade of small table service were heaped on two wide squares of linen on the floor. The burglar's loot had evidently been opened for examination; and Cliff Nichols had stooped to examine it when a woman's voice, full and rich, sounded from the hallway.

"Richard Monckton—arrested! I never dreamed that it would come to that!"

CHAPTER VI

THE WIRELESS

CLIFF NICHOLS hurried out into the hall to find a tall, almost classically proportioned woman, thickly veiled, standing against the wall with one hand resting on a high chair-back as though for support, and confronted by the heavy-featured guardian of the front door.

Her face could not be discerned, but the splendid lines of her figure were ripely mature, and the bare, ringless hand resting on the chair was white and delicately veined.

"Yes," the detective was saying, "we've all the evidence against him and I expect he'll confess any minute. You were the old man's housekeeper?"

"I am Mrs. Miller." The voice which came from behind the veil was low and tremulous now. "I cannot believe—cannot realize—!"

Cliff waited for no more.

"Mrs. Miller?" He advanced with outstretched hand. "I have been waiting for you. My colleagues and I are working with Mr. Hood to clear young Mr. Monckton of this absurd charge. Allow me to introduce myself."

He handed her a card with "The Shadows, Inc."

engraved in one corner and she took it mechanically while the plain-clothes man blustered:

“Not so fast with that amateur stuff! We want a statement from this woman! Now, then, Mrs. Miller, you knew of the row between the Moncktons, father and son; you know the young fellow threatened to kill the old man—”

“I know nothing—nothing whatever.” The card crumpled in her hand and Cliff Nichols felt an inward tingle of elation at the new control in her tone. “Mr. Richard Monckton has not lived here for several years, but I never heard either gentleman utter a word against the other. I was informed this morning that the elder Mr. Monckton had been murdered by a burglar, and I have been summoned to take an inventory and see what is missing. I have no information that would help the authorities in any way.”

She turned toward Cliff, but the detective took a quick step forward.

“That’s up to us. When did you see the old man last?”

“Yesterday morning, if you mean Mr. de Puyster Monckton,” Mrs. Miller replied steadily. “He sent word to me that he was going to New York and might not return before to-day. I went down to speak to him but he had no further instructions for me.”

“Did you know he was coming here?”

“He said nothing about his plans.”

“When was the last time you saw Richard Monckton?”

"More than a year ago." It seemed to Cliff that Mrs. Miller hesitated the merest fraction of a second. "I met him on Fifth Avenue one afternoon and he shook hands with me and asked after some of the old servants."

"Not after his father?" The detective's manner was becoming more truculent. "What did he say about him?"

"His father's name was not mentioned." This time the woman's gesture was final as she turned once more pointedly to Cliff. "Will you come with me to the rooms that were broken into upstairs? The dining-room will take longest—I understand from Mr. Hood that the silver was packed ready for removal—and I'll leave that till the last."

Muttering, the plain-clothes man stood aside and Cliff accompanied her up the broad staircase. Around the turn of the landing out of range of inquisitive eyes from below she paused, and, with a quick movement as though she were stifling, flung back the heavy veil, revealing a pallid face which bore unmistakable traces of former striking beauty, with fine, expressive dark eyes beneath strong, straight brows. This was a woman of character and decision, a woman with a history, Cliff felt with swift conviction. Surely she was out of place as a mere housekeeper!

"You have taken charge of Mr. Monckton's home for some time, Mrs. Miller?" he asked.

"For ten years." She nodded.

"You must have been greatly surprised when you learned he was coming to the city yesterday."

"Why?" Mrs. Miller parried swiftly.

"Because you hurried down to him immediately for an explanation." Cliff smiled. "Mr. Monckton was a man of great precision of habit, and you couldn't imagine what had happened to call him here, yesterday of all days."

"Yesterday—?"

"The day on which his son was to return to America."

Mrs. Miller darted a quick appraising glance at him.

"If he knew of it, it could have made no difference to him, Mr. Nichols," she replied. "They've held no intercourse for many years, as you know, I think. I was surprised, for it was most unusual for him to return to the city when he was once settled for the summer. Even on important business affairs he always summoned his attorney and the officials of the bank to him, and the vice-president has for long been the active head; but he didn't explain and of course I didn't ask."

She had spoken in a little rush and now she halted as abruptly and turned away. Had she told the truth? It was clear that she did not care to pursue the subject further and as Cliff followed her along the hall and through an open bedroom door he realized that there was more mystery here than he had imagined.

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The room was in disorder with masculine wearing apparel scattered about the floor from yawning dresser drawers and the ransacked closet.

“Richard Monckton’s room?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Miller looked about her. “It was always kept just as he left it when he went away, but there was nothing of value here, nothing but odds and ends of clothing, as you see. I infer from your card that you come from a private detective agency acting in his interests in this terrible affair: did you look about up here before I came?”

“No, I had only just arrived myself. This is the room where Mr. Monckton was killed,” Cliff added, as they turned to the door of a larger corner room; but a glance from the threshold made it unnecessary to continue, for the evidences of the tragedy were gruesomely apparent. A great pool of dried blood was clotted on the linen floor-covering and long, indistinct smudges of it led in double rows in two directions—past where they were standing out into the hall, and over to the telephone on the opposite wall.

A low gasp of horror came from the housekeeper’s whitening lips, but Cliff, carefully avoiding the stains, walked quickly to the instrument. There, on the gray of the wall just to the left of it were the four figures scrawled in an irregular downward slant, as Richard Monckton had described them, the two in the middle run together, the “six” detached and above, and the

last "nine" a swirling, open loop, its straggling down-stroke separated from it and ending in a deep gouge.

Drawing a sheet of tracing paper and a soft pencil from his pocket, Cliff took an exact impression of the writing even to the splutter of dots where the final stroke ended, and then with a sudden thought he stooped and examined the floor about his feet. There on its white covering lay a quarter-inch bit of lead, one end sharpened to a blunt point and the other broken short off, and with an exclamation of satisfaction Cliff put it in his pocket together with his own pencil and the tracing, and turned.

Mrs. Miller stood where he had left her, staring down at the hideous stain, and her lips were moving although no sound issued from them.

"The police contend that this proof of a burglar's presence was planted," he remarked. "It is possible, of course, and that it was the work of some one other than Richard Monckton, some one who fled before his arrival. He says he came on a mere idle impulse to see his old home again. Mrs. Miller, have you any idea of another reason which might have brought him here?"

She lifted her eyes, darkened still more by pain but tearless and oddly bright.

"No. It was natural enough, wasn't it?"

"You cannot imagine why his father should have come, either? Doesn't it look like an appointment—a private appointment for a meeting between them?"

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"That is impossible!" The housekeeper shook her head decidedly. "They would never have met again on earth!"

"You were present at the quarrel between them?" he asked quickly.

"I was—in the house." A deep flush suffused the pallor of her face and she bit her lip. "I should prefer not to speak—"

"You realize, of course, that you will be compelled to do so at the trial, if it comes to that?" Cliff interrupted. "We must be in possession of every fact that the prosecution will bring up in order to help the defense to combat it. What did you know of this quarrel?"

"Mr. Monckton wished his son to take a certain step which he found it impossible to agree to, and he was too excited to temporize," Mrs. Miller said slowly. "He felt that his father had no right to dictate in such a matter, where the happiness of another beside himself was involved, and he knew it would mean the end between them. The talk took place in the library one evening and lasted far into the night; it wasn't a quarrel; Mr. Monckton simply laid down the law and his son persisted in his refusal. In the end Mr. Monckton ordered his son to leave the house; he left within an hour."

"The happiness of another?" Cliff raised his brows. "What was the step which Mr. Monckton was set upon having his son take?"

"To marry, or at least propose marriage to, a cer-

tain lady." The housekeeper drew herself up and added hastily to forestall his query: "The lady's name was not mentioned in my hearing and I prefer not to guess at it, particularly as none of this has anything to do with the frightful death of Mr. Monckton. The drawers have all been ransacked, I see, and I must find out if anything has been taken."

With a shudder of repulsion she skirted the room close to the wall to avoid the brownish stains and moved to the massive bureau, while Cliff turned to an old rosewood desk between two of the windows; but the drawers were locked and had evidently resisted efforts to open them, as deep scratches on its smooth, rich surface showed.

Leaving the room at last he followed the footprints in blood up the second flight of stairs until the smudges finally ceased; but there was further evidence to guide him, in following that frenzied search for the murderer of which Richard had told. Doors stood open everywhere, some of them with smashed locks, and the larger pieces of furniture which might have provided concealment for the intruder had been dragged from their places; but though he looked as thoroughly as his predecessor seemingly had done he came upon no slightest trace. He was descending to the ground floor when he heard Phil Howe's voice raised in altercation and hastened his steps.

"You're crazy in the head!" Phil was observing in deep disgust. "Who's this guy 'Pete Hall' you've got me mixed with? I was never on the force."

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Hey, Cliff, come down here, will you? This flattie thinks I'm some friend of his."

Cliff hurried forward with a sudden sinking at his heart but he assumed an airly confident tone.

"What's this? Your mistake, lieutenant. Mr. Howe, here, has been my associate for several years in private investigation; we go in for cases that are usually settled without carrying them to the courts and it isn't likely that you've run in to him."

"We-ell, it's kinder funny!" The detective rubbed his chin reflectively. "I don't usually make mistakes and I could a-swarn I had him right! Look here, was he workin' with you this time last year?"

"We were together, of course, in the same line," Cliff assured him gravely and Phil's eyes twinkled. The previous year at that time he too had been in prison because of the vigilance of a certain watchman in a rural bank, and "Pete Hall" was the alias he always affected when in the toils of the law. "Phil, come upstairs; I've something to show you. Wait, here's George!"

George Roper's attenuated figure was indeed approaching from the dining-room, and Cliff went forward to meet him, drawing him and Phil Howe into the library and closing the door.

"That was a narrow squeak!" the latter remarked, a little shiver running through his tones. "He's the guy that pinched me back in 'leven for drilling a can in a pawnbroker's down on Houston Street. Phew!"

"Never mind, now; I convinced him, I think." Cliff

Nichols turned to his second companion. "George, Monckton's housekeeper is here and I wish you'd get hold of her and pump her; there's something queer in her manner and she won't talk very willingly, but I learned one thing from her—Richard's row with his father wasn't over his refusal to take up a banking career, but because of some woman the old gentleman wanted him to marry. The butler and valet must be somewhere about the place too, if they came down with her from Pocantico Hills. Take them separately and see what you can get out of them about old Monckton's movements and his bearing lately. There seems to be something mysterious about his coming to town yesterday. Phil, I want you to look around down here, particularly at the stuff in the dining-room and the window at the rear which Monckton said was forced, then follow the trail upstairs; I want your expert opinion as to whether the job was done by a real crook or not. In the room where the murder took place there's an old desk with the drawers locked; open them if you can without leaving any marks, and take out any letters or papers you find there, but wait till the housekeeper comes downstairs again. Rex gave you my message to join me here, but did you help him with those 'phone calls?"

"I did," George Roper replied. "Phil didn't get in till nearly time to start up here. I've had several bored housewives and irate shopkeepers on the line assuring me that they never heard of John Roberts; I chose that name because it's easy to get over the wire.

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Rex is trying to reach his friend David Mason and Ethel announced the laudable intention of going through the whole telephone book, but she added that it was worse than the Bible; I never suspected her of religious tendencies before! Nothing promising had turned up when we left."

"Did you get a flash at those figures written up on the wall, Cliff?" Phil Howe asked when George had departed to interview the housekeeper. "Did it strike you that it mightn't be a telephone number at all? You're running this show and there's no more kick coming from me, but I'll bet you draw a blank over the 'phone! Looks funny, don't it, that the two of them should have picked on the same night to come to the old home?"

"There were three," Cliff reminded him. "You've forgotten the thief."

"No, I haven't!" Phil laughed shortly. "I've got nothing to say about him except he's a poor judge of an empty house; his luck had sure run out on him!"

Cliff Nichols glanced sharply at the younger man.

"Are you beginning to doubt his existence too?" he demanded. "Wait till you see the loot he had packed up!"

"I'm going to!" Phil retorted significantly. "If there's another bull standing guard over it I'll wait till you get him aside and hold him; he might be packing around as good a memory as that first one, and I'm not any too anxious to renew acquaintance. I'll watch from the door here till the coast is clear."

Cliff found it unnecessary to engage the policeman's attention, however, for he was at the extreme rear of the hall deep in conversation with a stranger, a portly individual with short legs and corpulent paunch, dressed in the conventional blacks of a butler.

With a slight gesture to the waiting Phil, Cliff was advancing toward them when the sound of a half-stifled groan came from the direction of the pantry and he hesitated a moment, then crossed to it and pushed in the swinging door.

On a chair beside the glass draining-board of the sink a small, shrunken figure was seated, rocking back and forth with his gray head buried in his hands, and Cliff swung the door in place and then laid his hand on the bowed shoulder.

"Look up, my man. You're one of the staff from Monckton Manor?"

"Ricks is my name—Jim Ricks, sir." He lifted his head, pushing back the scanty silver lock which hung over his reddened eyes, and surveyed Cliff in dazed surprise. "What's wanted of me?"

"Oh, Mr. Monckton's valet?" Cliff drew another chair from before the narrow table and seated himself. "Did you know that Richard Monckton had been arrested?"

"I've just heard," the elderly voice quavered. "It—it struck me all of a heap! A black day for him and all of us!"

"The police are wrong, of course." He watched the old man for a sign of assent but there was none.

"Their ways are past me." Jim Ricks shook his head. "There's no telling what they may think they know! If I had thought Mr. Monckton meant to stay in town I'd have come too, in spite of him! For thirty years, since before Mr. Richard was born, I've looked after his father and never a night was he away from me before!"

"You didn't know, then, that he might remain over?"

"I'd no thought of it! 'Jim,' he says to me, when he'd read the telegram I brought him, 'tell William to bring the bays around at quarter to eleven. I'm going to the city. Let Mrs. Miller know.' I told her and I never see her so upset before; she asked me real sharp why he was going, but I couldn't say and then she went down to speak to him herself."

The word "telegram" had made Cliff prick up his ears but he passed that question for the moment.

"Perhaps Mr. Monckton told her that he might stay in town?" he suggested.

"No, he didn't!" The old valet shook his head again and drew his sleeve across his eyes where the quick tears of grief had sprung once more. "Peter heard what they said and told me later on when we began to worry. Short of coming straight out and asking, Mrs. Miller had tried every way she knew how to find out why he was going; but all he'd tell her was that he had been called in on a matter of business and she'd know what to do if any of the house-party that was coming to-morrow should telephone. Peter

says he never see her so put out, and she snapped the maids' heads off the rest of the day, and watched every train-time. 'Long about five she sent word to William to drive down to the station and wait till Mr. Monckton came, and he did wait till near midnight; she 'phoned to the station agent to send him home then, but she'd called up every place she could think of in the city first."

"There was no news of him?" Cliff leaned forward. "Did she telephone to the bank?"

"No, it was closed but she had Mr. Sanders on the wire—the lawyer, you know—and he hadn't heard anything. We didn't know what to think, but Mrs. Miller was the worst of all!"

"She was very fond of Mr. Monckton?"

Jim's eyelids drooped as though in belated caution.

"She's been housekeeper for ten years. What are you here for, sir? Do you come from the police?"

"No, my friends and I are private detectives helping Mr. Hood to free Mr. Richard Monckton," Cliff responded. "He and his father didn't get on and we know of the quarrel that separated them, but who was the lady Mr. Monckton wanted his son to marry?"

"Miss Mary Andros? They're a very fine old family, longer here even than the Moncktons, and Miss Mary would have been a fitting and proper mistress for this house, but Mr. Richard never took to her. He's caused his father many a trouble with his wild, restless ways, though perhaps I oughtn't to speak." Jim sighed deeply. "We never thought there

was real harm in the lad but he got into more than one scrape that was no honor to the family. Mr. Monckton was proud and wouldn't let anybody see how the quarrel with his son had hurt him, but I was closer to him than the rest and I could see how he grieved, though he didn't speak of it—not once! To think that such an end should have come to him!”

His wrinkled face quivered and Cliff Nichols remarked hastily:

“You spoke of a telegram Mr. Monckton received yesterday morning. Do you know who it was from?”

Jim hesitated.

“No, sir. It wasn't a regular telegram; not the usual kind. It was like they send from the ocean, sir; a wireless.”

CHAPTER VII

THE RAT-FACED MAN

HALF an hour later Cliff Nichols unobtrusively let himself out of a side door of the Monckton house and proceeded on foot down the path which led to the smaller gate. He had learned several interesting facts, but none that gave a clew to the burglar, and he was anxious to attempt to trace the 'phone call without further delay.

Twice zealous precinct detectives halted him in the grounds and again he was stopped at the gate, this time by a headquarters man. Privately he decided to avoid such risks as much as possible in future. He carried in his pocket a copy of the only clew the murderer had left behind him and he felt that he should require nothing more from the scene of the crime that his colleagues could not obtain.

On the nearest street corner stood a small, brightly painted stationer's shop with rows of magazines and pyramids of cigar boxes stacked behind the shining window, and a newspaper stand in front. Beside the stand stood a stout, elderly man with a round, good-natured countenance and protruding eyes, ringed with horn spectacles.

Cliff paused to buy a paper and his glance fell upon

the glaring headlines announcing the murder and subsequent arrest. He pointed to it.

"Pretty bad thing that happened in the old house back there," he observed.

"Fierce!" The shopkeeper nodded quickly. "Both of them I know well, the father and the son. The papers I deliver there, and always when he drives past Mr. Monckton has a word for old Emil. He is like a burgomaster here in this neighborhood, where these many generations they have lived, and much has he done for us. I should like to meet the devil who killed him!"

"You saw his son last night when he drove by, didn't you?" Cliff asked. "It's a good while since you've seen him up around here before that, isn't it?"

The protruding eyes stared behind their thick glasses.

"How do you know I see him?" Emil demanded. "Me, I say nothing to nobody, I mind my own business! If you from the police come—?"

"I don't!" Cliff laughed. "Richard told me so himself. He said he waved back to you when you greeted him and he hadn't seen you since he left home."

"Six years." Emil removed his spectacles and began to polish them vigorously with a red cotton handkerchief. "So you are a friend of young Richard? That is different. When he call the cops and they take him, I say to myself, maybe I didn't see him, my eyes ain't so good lately and maybe it was some one else again. I read by the papers that he goes and sits

himself down in the library and reads for more than an hour and all the time his poor father is dead upstairs! So strange it is that he should come back after all this time on the very night his father is killed!"

"You've been here a long while, Richard tells me," Cliff ventured, with a glance at the name painted on the window. "You knew him as a boy, Mr. Deutsch?"

"I did, and a holy terror he was before he was sent away to school; that tutor could do nothing with him and often I threaten to thrash him for the tricks he played!" A reminiscent smile wreathed the fat face for an instant, then he sobered. "Always running away he was, and wild for adventure! Such a boy! I am glad when I see him come home last night, I think then the troubles are over between him and his father; and when I see by the paper what has happened I say I keep out of it, I know nothing, but it is a terrible thing!"

"You knew the old gentleman was away, didn't you?"

"At the manor? Last month he has gone, but yesterday I see him come back; in an open taxicab he is, and I think it strange for he does not like to ride in them; also he is so occupied with himself that he does not think to speak to me and that isn't like him."

"He was alone?" The question fairly leaped from Cliff's lips. "What time was it, do you remember?"

"He was all by himself and I remember well, for the delivery boy has just come back to keep store for me while I go to my dinner; it is about half past

twelve." Emil blinked as he replaced his spectacles. "I don't speak of it, though, to that other feller who comes asking me questions an hour ago. I tell him I ain't seen none of the family since the house is closed a month back, yet."

"'The other fellow?'" Cliff repeated. "Who was he?"

"How should I know?" The storekeeper shrugged. "He is a stranger, I never laid eyes on him before—a thin, pointed face he has, like a rat, and his ears stick up. He is dressed all in gray with a gray soft hat pulled low over his eyes, and he talks without moving his mouth. Such questions!"

"About Richard?" Cliff added with quickly assumed carelessness. "Maybe he was a reporter."

"No. It is about Mr. Monckton he asks, and he is more anxious than if he is only looking for copy for his paper—like maybe he knew him. He is sorry and worried, and it comes to me, this feller knows more as he lets on." He threw out his hands. "Not about the murder I shouldn't say, but somethings between him and Mr. Monckton. He hung around till I ask him what is it to him, this thing that has happened? Then he goes quick enough, in the direction of the Monckton house, but not to it; I watch and I see him go on past the gates. You tell young Richard if you go to see him where they got him; ask him does he know that feller in gray."

Cliff assured him that he would do so and took his departure, turning over this latest development in his

mind as he made his way to the nearest subway station.

Who was this man in gray and what was his interest in the case? The storekeeper's description of him had not been a pleasant one; a rat-faced man with protruding ears who talked without moving his mouth. The old German was plainly prejudiced, but surely the stranger with his hat pulled low over his eyes bore indications of being a tough, if not worse; what could there be in common between him and that notable figure, de Puyster Monckton?

The latter had come to town in response to that wireless message, so much was evident. If it had been sent at sea and he had come into town a few hours later to meet the individual who had despatched it, it must have come from an incoming vessel not far from its berth. Had another passenger ship besides that which carried Richard arrived the day before? Had the message been sent from the same ship, from Richard himself? Did he intend to appeal at last to his father for financial assistance?

The questions crowded each other in his thoughts during the ride downtown, but when he reached the office of The Shadows he was no nearer an answer to them, and Ethel Jepson's opening remark effectually erased them from his mind.

"Everybody's out, but they had a wonderful time calling up all those numbers," she announced. "I shouldn't wonder if Central thought we were all crazy here! I was to tell you that we'd worked down

through every Exchange but these and I guess they've had about everything but the morgue on the wire!"

She laid a slip of paper before Cliff Nichols and he read aloud:

"Knickerbocker, Metropolitan, Cortright, Queensbridge, Chatham, Parkside,—well, they won't take long. Did anybody have any luck?"

"Only in getting themselves disliked!" Ethel was fast becoming her old flippant self again. "The first person Mr. Corliss got on the wire invited him to come down and get 'licked,' and somebody asked Mr. Baynes why in thunder he was calling his wife up and then faking such a name as that when he got the wrong party on the wire. He had mentioned some wop—Italian, I mean—'Tish' something, and it did sound funny, when the family's name there was Gilhooley."

"Titian?" Cliff growled. "Confound his artistic soul! I'll have a try at those other numbers myself later, but first I've got something I want to examine."

He drew the sheet of tracing paper from his pocket and turned to go to his own study, but Ethel stopped him with a wistful question.

"You haven't anything for me to do yet? I tried going straight through the 'phone book but it isn't very easy reading and with our client in the Tombs and no other case to bother with till we've finished this I'll have a lot of time on my hands. I—I'd like to get in on this one with the rest of you—I just know

young Mr. Monckton told the truth and it must be awful to be in prison for something he didn't do!"

"There isn't any way I can use you now, Ethel." Cliff smiled at her as he shook his head. She at least had no doubt of their client, although George and Phil and even Rex appeared to be weakening, and the housekeeper as well as the old valet and the news-dealer were all three evasive and significantly non-committal.

He continued to his own sanctum, drawing the panel closed behind him, and with his volumes of specimens and strong magnifying glasses he was soon deep in a study of the characters he had traced. The numbers he had meant to call on the telephone were forgotten and he was oblivious to the flight of time, until he realized he was hungry and glancing at his watch discovered that it was after two.

He lunched hastily at a little restaurant across the street and returned to find Henry, George, Phil and Lucian awaiting him.

"What's doing?" he asked. "Henry, did you see Monckton's body? Tell me about him; I thought there might be a portrait of him at his house but I saw none."

"He must have been a pretty fine-looking old scout." Henry Corliss folded his hands comfortably over his stomach and settled back in his chair. "His blue eyes were almost as bright in color as his son's and he had the same short, straight nose and chiseled jaw: I shouldn't have taken him for a day over sixty but he's

nearer seventy, from the records. He was a sturdy old chap with a splendid, muscular torso in mighty good condition. If he had half a chance I'll wager he could have put some fight for himself, but that blow that caught him was a wicked one and cracked his skull like an egg-shell. The autopsy 'places the time of his death between ten and twelve last night.'

"Which would be just as good evidence for the police as corroboration of young Richard's story," George Roper murmured. "How was the old boy dressed, by the way?"

"Very good black trousers and waistcoat with a white hair-line stripe and an old black silk lounging jacket." Henry fumbled in his pockets. "The body must have been left undisturbed where it fell except for Richard lifting the head to his knees, as he says; for he carried an old heavy gold watch with a chain and square topaz fob, a little over three hundred dollars in a bill-fold, and loose money amounting to about ten or twelve—yes, ten eighty-seven. Here's the list. His links were plain gold but he wore an oblong emerald with the coat-of-arms cut in it that must be worth several thousand, at least, and these were all intact. Odd the burglar didn't even stop to strip the ring off; he must have been in a panic."

There was a note of reservation in his tone and Cliff's lip curled.

"Meaning you're beginning to think that burglar didn't exist?" he asked coldly. "You might as well come clean with it!"

"No, I don't say he didn't," Henry dissented mildly. "I only say there are a few things that look funny, that's all."

"And last night you were the first to remind us our work would be doubly hard if we didn't take our client's word in good faith; this looks like it!" Cliff turned to Phil Howe. "You examined the loot in the dining-room and the forced window?"

"Yes. There wasn't anything distinctive about those bundles of old silver, just a lot of junk from the sideboard and chest lumped together. If the guy was a topnotcher and knew the ropes he could have got a grand for it all told, maybe. The little window-pane just over the catch had been puttied and cut out clean; it was lying on the ground outside and there was a smudge of dirt spread around on the pantry floor that could have been tracked from the garden. Nothing like plain footprints, though. That desk up in the old guy's room had been opened before I got to it, for the papers inside were all thrown around and they were just household accounts and receipts for upkeep—all except these." Phil tossed a packet across the table. "I couldn't make them out so I brought them along. I unlocked it easily with a skeleton and somebody else must have done the same thing or had a regular key that fitted it. A long-nosed dick from headquarters—a new one, thank the Lord!—came while I was there and showed me how the body was lying close to the light switch in the wall, as if he'd just turned it when he was cracked on the head."

"I remember where the switch was, to the right of the door!" Cliff exclaimed. "If Monckton had come in and felt for the switch with his right hand, his left side would have been turned to the room, and the murderer lunging across from the telephone—Henry, which side of the head was the wound on?"

"The left," Henry admitted, but added doggedly: "If he stood with his right side to the wall like that a blow coming from any direction in the room would have caught him on the left, though. That's common sense."

"The guy knew how to force the window, Cliff, but it's the easiest way known and described a million times in the newspapers; a child could have gotten away with it if they had read how it was done; anybody could have tied up that silver, and of course there weren't any tracks leading away from under the window over the grass," Phil supplemented. "You want my expert opinion and you've got it; a real crook could have left those traces behind but so could the rankest outsider. I'm like Henry, on the fence."

"And you, George?" Cliff glanced in exasperation at the cross-examiner of the firm. "You didn't believe young Monckton last night; you said he hadn't been frank with us. Did you find out anything from the housekeeper or the servants?"

"Several things." George Roper nodded solemnly. "The most significant, under the circumstances, is that they all secretly think Richard may have done it and they're afraid to speak. I tackled the housekeeper

first. She suspects why the old man came to town yesterday, if she doesn't know, but wild horses won't drag it out of her, and I'm morally certain it was connected in some way with his son's return to America. She didn't approve of his coming and would have stopped him if she could. She's a strange bird, that Mrs. Miller, and it's easy to see she was a raving beauty not so long ago! I'd like to know how it happens she's a housekeeper, and who 'Miller' was; a dumbbell could see she was out of her class."

"I talked to the old valet after I left you," observed Cliff.

"He told me you did. He's fiercely loyal to the memory of Monckton, but he hasn't much use for the young man. He said he mentioned that wireless message to you and it's my opinion he read it but he won't admit it. He distrusts Mrs. Miller, jealous of her influence over the old gentleman, providing she actually had any; he seems to have been a pretty dominant character, however, from what the butler told me. Did you see him?"

"Yes, if you mean a shortish man with a chest and stomach like a pouter pigeon," Cliff replied. "He was talking with the officer and I didn't get a chance to speak to him."

"That's Peter Downes, the butler, all right. He's been with the Moncktons for eighteen years and he evidently had a lot of respect for his employer, even if he didn't worship him as the old valet did, and wasn't so broken up over his death and the manner of

it. He is nursing a violent attachment for Mrs. Miller, if I'm any judge, but he has an eye out for the main chance, too. When I touched diplomatically on the legacies probably forthcoming now, he said it wasn't the time to think of it, with Mr. Monckton done to death and hardly cold, but he'd always been most generous and appreciated faithful service, and no doubt they'd all be suitably remembered. He all but licked his lips and purred!

"He took the wireless message from the boy who brought it and gave it to old Jim for Monckton. Mrs. Miller saw him do it, though she said nothing to me about it, and inadvertently he let out that after Monckton left for the city he came upon her in the old gentleman's room. He hadn't any business there, and it's my opinion they were both after the same thing, a glimpse of that message. I don't believe they were successful, though; Henry hasn't mentioned it being found on Monckton's body, and if he didn't destroy it I guess old Jim knows where it is; but he'll have to be approached from a different angle."

"Another odd thing happened. Some one called up the old gentleman about seven o'clock last night. Peter Downes answered the 'phone and he says it was a man's voice that he didn't recognize, and faint, as though it came from some distance—he supposed New York. He said Mr. Monckton was not there and asked if there was any message but the man rang off without replying. Mrs. Miller hurried up just as Peter was turning away and she tried to get the

number back or trace it, but didn't have any luck, and blamed him for not making the man leave his name. Peter says he asked for it over and over but the man just ignored the question."

"Did any one else call up?"

"Not until this morning, when Mr. Hood telephoned very early and told them what had happened, summoning the three of them to town. Peter and Mrs. Miller had a hard time getting Jim fit to travel, he was so prostrated with grief, but they caught the first train. Peter was shocked when that officer I saw him talking to told him of Richard's arrest, but a change came over his manner when he spoke of it. He'd come to them when the boy was twelve and a sad limb he was, always up to something. He hadn't known anything about the young gentleman for the past six years, hadn't ever seen him about the place, and he understood the father had washed his hands of him completely. The police might know what they were about, it wasn't for him to say; it was an awful thing, anyway you looked at it."

"Another doubter!" Cliff commented. "Come on, George, what do you think? Do you side with the majority?"

"I think any sane person is bound to doubt unless young Richard changes his attitude and comes clean!" George asserted weightily. "The circumstantial evidence is all against him and the practical proof of his story is knocked into a cocked hat if we look on it as possibly framed. What's he holding out on us, and

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why? If he did kill his father and set the scene for the fake robbery, couldn't he have written up those numbers too, with some notion of throwing the police off the track?"

"No, he couldn't, because he's not blind, nor left handed!" Cliff retorted. "The man who wrote them was both!"

CHAPTER VIII

A HOUSE DIVIDED

FOR a moment after Cliff's announcement the other 'Shadowers present stared at each other and then Phil Howe swore softly.

"Are you trying to put it over on us that a blind crook broke into that house, tied up the silver, went through the rooms upstairs and slugged the old man who came on him there? Cliff, you're going cuckoo over those damned numbers!"

"I'm not!" Cliff declared. "You're all blind yourselves; willfully so, for you're letting the bull-headed opinion of the police throw dust in your eyes. I didn't mean that the thief was totally blind, but he is as near-sighted as the mischief; I found that out by studying his writing. And as for his being left-handed, weren't those figures written on the wall to the left of the 'phone? That's the side the receiver is always hung on, if you've noticed, for that very reason; to leave the right hand free to write any message, and in order to write that number where he did he must have switched the receiver to the other hand and used the left one."

"Maybe some one else thought of that stunt and did it purposely," George Roper suggested. "I don't mean just on the spur of the moment; but what if Monckton had been brought to the city on some ruse

and the whole affair premeditated? I don't claim that there's anything to substantiate such a theory, but there is nothing against it, either. I know one thing; if it wasn't an actual telephone number that was written there, it was a series of figures subconsciously fixed on the mind of the man who put them down, and I'd like mightily to find out if there was any combination of six, ought and nine with which Richard was especially familiar."

"You see, Cliff?" Henry Corliss asked. "We're all taking a common-sense, unprejudiced view of the case as it has come to us, and you've got to admit that it looks pretty slim for our client. What does Rex say about it?"

"I admit nothing of the kind!" Cliff Nichols retorted hotly. "Rex can say and think what he pleases and so can you all! If you don't want to work on this case with me you can all go to blazes and I'll tackle it alone, and win out, too!"

"I haven't spoken yet, Cliff," Lucian Baynes reminded him. "I'm bound to say, though, that if gossip counts for anything our young friend seems to have planned something drastic and talked too much about it. You left word with Rex for me to take that old name again that I used on the liners when I wanted to bring in something particularly good without the formality of paying duty on it, so as 'Lester Ballantyne' I spent the morning looking up people who might know of the Norcross incident. I found one or two whose reminiscences were illuminating.

“A chap who crossed on the ‘Empiric’ with me one year knows the family well and he likes a bit of scandal as well as any woman. Ten or eleven years ago, when Chester Norcross was in a preparatory school—from which he was afterward expelled, by the way,—his sister Barbara went to the commencement exercises and danced at the university where Richard was an undergrad. He met her and ‘rushed’ her, after the manner of youngsters, but the attachment wasn’t so strong that it held him back from the long hunting and exploration trips that he’d planned when he finished college. However, on his periods at home he was devoted to her and on the eve of his departure for the last trip their engagement was announced.

“My friend seems to have the family tree of every one at his finger-tips and, compared to the Moncktons, the Norcrosses are new-rich. The foundation of their wealth was laid by the great-grandfather of the present generation in the manufacture of farm implements, and not until twenty years ago were they even heard of in society. There are two younger girls, but Barbara is the beauty of the family and was the most popular débutante of her year. De Puyster Monckton gave in with good grace, but it was generally understood that the engagement was a great disappointment to him, and he was more elated than mortified when it was broken.

“Rex says Hood told you that Richard thrashed his future brother-in-law because of the young cad’s unwelcome attentions to an actress, and that Barbara

broke the engagement immediately. My friend thinks it wasn't because of her brother, for she detests him most cordially, but because she was angry that Richard should have championed so openly and publicly, another woman, and an actress to boot. He thinks she was always more in love with Richard than he with her, and the fact that she is twenty-eight now and still unmarried makes it seem likely. Lots of society chaps and a title or two have played around her, but apparently she has never given a thought to any one since Richard."

"Our client has not married, either," George Roper remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, but business has taken most of his attention, and here's where another odd thing comes in. The chap I was interviewing is in Wall Street, too, and he says there's something strange about the ill-luck that has pursued Richard there; he says it seems as if fate had been playing with him, like a cat with a mouse, and as soon as he is in a fair way to make a killing the bottom mysteriously drops out of the market. He's had a dozen chances to pull off splendid coups and his judgment hasn't been at fault as far as any one could tell; but he's invariably been caught and squeezed, though he has managed each time to just save himself from going to the wall. For the last year or two he's lost steadily, everything he touches goes to thunder, as if some powerful interests were at work against him personally, playing him and letting him down, and now putting the screws on to wipe him

out. That's exactly what my friend said; think it over. What if somebody with practically unlimited money back of him were out to get him? If he suspected that, it would be apt to make him desperate, wouldn't it?"

"That's a possible phase that hadn't occurred to me," Cliff Nichols admitted. "But you say he's been talking too much?"

"I'm coming to that," Lucian Baynes responded. "When I left my friend I went to another and found corroboration, of the Norcross affair, at least; and then I thought I'd have a look at the passenger list of the 'Tritonia' that brought Richard home yesterday. I discovered a name on it I knew, but others that I didn't expect: Miss Barbara Norcross and maid. I hunted up the man I knew; he's an art dealer who makes it a point to meet as many wealthy and not too discriminating buyers of art objects as he can, principally on shipboard; and he isn't above letting them have something they've taken a fancy to without discouraging their illusions as to its authenticity. He hadn't met Miss Norcross on the trip over, but knew her by sight, and Richard, too. He told me that for the first two days out they never appeared to see each other, passed on the promenade deck without a glance! Richard kept to himself, smoked a lot, and repelled all advances, but all of a sudden on the morning of the third day, my friend saw them together, and they were practically inseparable till the end of the voyage. That's that.

“On the last night out he happened to be bundled up on a steamer chair when they came along. If they saw him at all they must have thought he was asleep, for they halted at the rail just in front of him, and the snatches of conversation he caught showed that Richard was telling the girl his difficulties and how he meant to overcome them. ‘Caught short . . . a tight squeeze . . . third time in a year I faced ruin . . . know now what I’m up against.’ These were some of the phrases that came to his ears but there was more to follow. ‘Seemed to turn up everywhere I went . . . dogging me over Europe . . . All for it at one conference and the next turning me down cold with my proposition . . . been approached and influenced . . . only explanation.’ Miss Norcross was interjecting little remarks of indignant sympathy all the time, but my man was listening to Richard, for he’d noticed that another passenger had appeared to be interested in him, too, during the voyage, though making no attempt to speak to him. It wasn’t as obvious as trailing, and my art acquaintance had had some experience with that when he cut a deal or two too fine, but it was plain that this other man was highly curious about Richard and his associates on board.”

“Did he describe this man to you?” Cliff asked quickly. “How was he dressed and what did he look like?”

“What have you heard about him?” Lucian stared. “I thought I was bringing you news! He said the man was older than Richard, quiet and gentlemanly with

a keen, intelligent face; his clothes were London made but he wasn't an Englishman. My acquaintance was inquisitive about what he'd heard, and the following afternoon—yesterday—as they were coming up the Bay he elbowed his way to the rail beside this fellow, and engaged him in conversation. His name was Christopher Radwick and he was a buyer for a Chicago crockery house. That is all the information my friend got and, of course, we can take it for what it's worth if he was really interested in Richard Monckton. He and Miss Norcross have made up their differences again, even if the engagement is not renewed; if it is Richard has all the more reason for making good and getting back at his enemy, as he threatened to do not half an hour before he left his club last night."

Lucian paused, and Henry Corliss exclaimed:

"God A'mighty! It's getting stronger against young Richard all the time! You ain't been to his club, have you?"

"No, but the first acquaintance I interviewed mentioned that Richard was a member of, and I know one of the stewards at the club he visited last night; it's name was in all the papers this morning. This fellow used to be chief deck steward on my favorite liner and he's helped me more than once, for a substantial commission, to bring in certain articles the customs men were on the lookout for," Lucian Baynes explained candidly. "I got hold of him and found that he served some private stock last night at about half past ten, to Richard Monckton and a friend, a broker named

Gordon Barry. They sat a little apart from the others in the lounge. The steward brought the tray and set it down back of them, and they couldn't have known he was near, for while he struggled with a soda bottle he heard Barry say: 'You're sure of this, Dick?' Richard replied, 'I know it at last and before another day passes I'm going to drag the truth out of him if I have to kill him to get it!'

"That was all, for the soda bottle popped just then and they talked of something else, at least till the steward was out of earshot. It isn't conclusive evidence, of course, but it was a definite threat, and all the police would consider necessary to clinch their case."

"That's tommyrot!" Cliff sprang from his chair and thrusting his hands in his pockets strode up and down. "Richard wasn't talking about his father, but about the man he thinks is out to get him on the market! If there was a conspiracy against our client, it only bears out his frank statement to us that he was in extreme financial difficulties; and none of this old gossip, as I thought, has anything to do with his father's murder!"

"And you say we're blind!" George threw up his hands. "Go ahead on the line you're following and you'll make The Showers a public joke the very first time our activities have been brought to the attention of the police!"

"Seriously, I think you're wrong, old chap!" Lu-

cian Baynes murmured. "I told you from the start this was no ordinary murder by a common thief caught in the act—"

"That fool number has got him hiped!" Phil Howe interrupted. "There's nothing to it, Cliff, old scout; forget that handwriting on the wall and get down to cases!"

"We're sure of just one fact; that the old man was murdered. Our client engaged us to find who did it, and if we must hang it on him it's his own fault," Henry remarked. "If we'd just keep an open mind and try out all the possibilities—?"

"What's the argument, gentlemen?" Cool, slightly amused tones sounded from the entrance and they turned to find the leader of their organization smiling in upon them as he stood drawing off his gloves.

"No argument, Rex; mutiny!" Cliff exclaimed bitterly. "I'm just hearing how many kinds of a fool I am and what my detective ability amounts to, but I've taken my stand and I'll resign before I back down from it!"

"Who's talking about resigning?" Rex Powell advanced to the table with a quick note of authority superseding the amusement. "I'm sure none of us need to be reminded of the agreement under which we incorporated ourselves, and this case is in your hands, absolutely! You worked cheerfully and willingly under the orders of three of us, and now it's our turn to carry out your instructions."

"Aw, Rex, we were only talking it over the way we always do, and Cliff got sore because we don't any of us agree with him!" Phil muttered.

"We owe it to the reputation we are building up for the future not to waste precious time chasing rainbows, but of course we are under Cliff's orders," supplemented George, adding shrewdly: "You don't know what we have dug up yet, of course, but I'm sure you agree that those figures written beside the 'phone are not the sole important factor in the affair!"

"No, I think there are other very grave considerations, from what I have discovered myself," Rex Powell conceded. "It doesn't matter what any of us think, though; Cliff is our chief!"

"I have not denied it!" Lucian said stiffly. "I have made my report and now I am waiting for further directions."

"Good boy!" Rex smiled with unquenchable good humor. "And you, Henry?"

"God bless my soul, I was only reasoning with him!" Henry Corliss expostulated. "Didn't he help me about those anonymous letters? I may think he's got the wrong flea by the ear, but I'll hang onto it with him till Kingdom Come!"

"Well, Cliff, what do you say?" Rex turned to him.

"I'll tell you." Cliff faced them. "We've traced almost all the numbers; there are only a few exchanges left, and we'll finish them up in five minutes. Luce, you try 'Knickerbocker'; let Phil take 'Cortright,' Henry 'Queensbridge' and George 'Chatham.' Go

down to the pay station in the lobby so that you can call all at once and save time, and as you leave tell Ethel to give a ring to the same number 'Metropolitan.' That takes in all but the last and I'll attend to that later. If we exhaust all the numbers without result I'll promise to listen to you."

"Fair enough!" Phil exclaimed, and led the exodus into the outer office, ashamed of his insubordination.

When the last of the quartette had gone Cliff turned to Rex.

"It was bully of you to clear the air like that, old man, especially as you think they're right, after all!" he declared. "What have you found out that strengthens your opinion?"

"I haven't any, actually; I merely feel that we shouldn't pin our faith on that one seeming clew when other significant points remain unexplained," Rex Powell responded. "I found my friend Ormsby and took him to lunch. As I expected, he was bubbling over with the news of the murder and arrest, for he has known the Moncktons for years. He likes young Richard immensely and hasn't an idea we're on the case; for he thinks The Shadows merely a blind for our more subtle activities in the higher branches of the Secret Service allied with international diplomacy. That made what he said to me all the more damning, for he is as sure as you are that the authorities have made a bad mistake and denounces it as an outrage. He met Richard at a country club last June and, knowing things were in a rotten way with him down on

the Street, he tried to speak of it and offer a little assistance to tide him over, but Richard wouldn't even discuss the matter and Ormsby desisted for fear of offending his pride. He remembers the incident clearly, not only because it was the last time he saw him, but because Richard acted so strangely and talked in such a rambling fashion that he was seriously concerned. It was just after that big Tillinghast robbery when the butler decamped with over two hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels during a house party, you may recall; and Richard kept talking about it and how easy it would be to break into the old Monckton mansion because of his father's prejudice against burglar alarms. Cliff, he *described exactly* how a window could be forced and the family silver stolen, together with any trinkets and old jewelry lying about upstairs, in absolute conformity with every detail of the evidence left last night except for the dead body! Do you see what that may—what it must—mean? If, in a moment of ungovernable rage, last night, he so far forgot himself as to strike his father, and then discovered to his horror that the old man was dead, that old hypothetical description may have come back to his mind, and as a means of self-preservation he put it into practice! I said I hadn't any opinion, but strictly between ourselves, it isn't true. I'm convinced that Richard Monckton murdered his father!"

CHAPTER IX

EVEN THE WOMAN!

THERE was a brief silence between Cliff Nichols and Rex Powell after the latter had made his declaration and then Cliff shook his head slowly.

“You’re sure Richard is guilty merely because, by a not remarkable coincidence, his description of a hypothetical burglary has been carried out in fact, Rex. He was concerned about his father’s disregard of ordinary precaution, even though he and the old gentleman were estranged, and his thoughts naturally centered on his family home. Ormsby himself took that view of it, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Rex admitted. “He’s the kind of chap who wouldn’t believe evil of his friends, thank God, no matter what proof was offered him! He says only that it must be frightful for Richard to realize that not only did the robbery take place exactly as he demonstrated it could be done, but that his father should have met his death through it! That’s all I have to tell you, and I’m under your orders like the rest. What is next?”

“First I want to tell you something of what we’ve all discovered.” Cliff briefly recounted the events of the morning, but made no reference to his conversation with the owner of the stationery store, nor did

he overemphasize Lucian Baynes' story of the homeward voyage of the 'Tritonia.' He had said nothing to the other Shadowers of the man in gray who had so persistently questioned Emil Deutsch, and he decided for a time to keep that incident to himself, just as in all fairness he would keep his word to them. They were so ready to believe their client guilty, so sure that handwriting on the wall meant nothing, that he would direct their investigations in the channels that pleased them best, but, alone and unaided, he would find the real murderer of de Puyster Monckton.

He was just concluding his recital when Phil, Lucian and George reëntered in a body and the former exclaimed:

"That's a hot one! I got the police station! Holy Cat!"

"And I the rectory of a church," George Roper supplemented. "I had to invent a christening on the spur of the moment, but I greatly fear the good man will wait vainly for this particular child!"

"Knickerbocker 6099 is the number of an establishment we might find it amusing to investigate in our leisure moments," Lucian murmured. "The voice that replied to me was cagey, but I've left my ill-gotten gains in too many kursaals on the other side not to know a private gambling club when I encounter one. What shall I do now, Cliff?"

"You've drawn blanks, as Phil predicted?" Cliff smiled. "You chaps win, I fancy! Luce, go and bribe your friend the steward to the limit for any club gos-

sip he can pick up for us, and then see if, through the fellow passenger you first interviewed, you cannot obtain an introduction to Miss Barbara Norcross; you'll know what to do then."

Lucian Baynes's small blond mustache twitched excitedly.

"By Jove, old man, now I think you've taken the right trail! It will be rather a large order, I am afraid, but I'll do my best to fill it. He ought to be still at his Broad Street office."

In the paneled opening he collided with Henry Corliss, who charged in, red and perspiring.

"God A'mighty, what a woman I got on the wire! She raked me over the coals for keeping her husband out all night—! Did any of you boys strike pay dirt?"

"No, Henry," Cliff replied for them. "I bow to your superior judgment! Phil, run up to Pocantico Hills and see what you can find out through the servants of the Manor about de Puyster Monckton's affairs, his guests during the past month and how he's acted, what his bearing has been. Stop at Hood's office before you go; he'll give you a list of these house guests and also of the servants, and I want you to study them and their associates as well. If there's a pretty housemaid you shouldn't find it too difficult! Tell Hood to send us a duplicate list here, and as soon as you are settled for a few days write to me, special delivery, and let me know how and where to provide you with further instructions."

"I'll get the next train!" Phil Howe promised, starting for the outer office. "You'll hear from me in the morning by the first mail."

"George," Cliff turned to him, "use your own methods, but get a line on that supposed crockery buyer, Christopher Radwick. It ought to be easy to trace him, for he only landed yesterday on the 'Tritonia,' remember. As soon as you have located him positively, 'phone to Ethel and give her as detailed a description of his personal appearance as you can. Then get on his trail and don't leave it till you find out why he was so interested in Richard."

"You'd like to know his movements so far to-day, too, wouldn't you?" George's lugubrious expression lightened with a sly grin. "I suspect that you could tell me something more of him if you felt inclined, but I'll go ahead with the data I have. I won't get in touch with the office here till I have positive news."

"Rex, I'm going to leave it to you, too, as to how you'll go about it, but I want a lot more information concerning the Moncktons and their friends, any little details of their affairs during the past few years. If I'm not around Ethel will take any message."

Cliff followed him out to the entrance door and after it had closed behind him the secretary remarked:

"Mr. Nichols, there's something funny about 6099 Metro. I asked for 'Sadie Cohen,' seeing about a million of them in the 'phone book yesterday, and when a man's voice answered I said I thought she worked there. 'The hell you do!' he came back. I

tried my best to get the name of whatever place it was, but finally he said it was Eight Twenty-six East One Hundred and Fortieth Street, and laughed and rang off."

"All right, Ethel; I don't believe there is any such number but we'll find out. Thanks." He strolled back into the council room where Henry Corliss awaited him alone, and the latter looked up, flushing again.

"I suppose you think, Cliff, that we've all treated you pretty shabbily—?" he began, but Cliff stopped him with a gesture.

"I think nothing of the kind! I'm glad you came out honestly with your opinions," he rejoined heartily. "I may be sending you on a goose-chase, but I'd like to have you go up to East One Hundred and Fortieth Street and look for number 826. I suspect you'll find it is a vacant lot or the middle of the river, but scout around the neighborhood and see if you can find anybody who knows anything about what happened at the Monckton house. You'll have to go carefully and it may take time but I think you'll learn something."

Henry looked dubious but resigned.

"I'll tackle it," he remarked. "You couldn't give me a line on what you expect me to unearth?"

"Haven't an idea!" Cliff responded frankly. "You can judge by the neighborhood; I imagine it will be pretty cheap. Anyway, do the best you can."

When the medical expert had departed for his unaccustomed field, Cliff called Ethel into his sanctum

and laid before her the transfer of the tracing which he had made.

"What do you think of this?" he asked. "It's a copy of the handwriting on the wall beside that 'phone. Offhand, what would you say about the person who wrote it? Almost blind, wasn't he?"

"I shouldn't say so!" Ethel shook her head decidedly. "I've seen the writing of people that were blind or nearly so, and some accounts they kept, and the figures were separated evenly and in straight rows. They get so they can tell things just by the feeling and it's so with their writing; a sort of sense of spacing comes natural to them, I guess. A person don't have to be blind because he can't see what he's putting down. Maybe he was in the dark."

"The dark!" Cliff fairly shouted. "Of course he was! I've known that all the time but I never thought—! He couldn't use his flashlight if he had one, for he was writing with one hand and holding the receiver with the other! Monckton came and switched the lights on suddenly just as he put down the last figure. That's why the pencil broke and he whirled around and struck him down!"

"The pencil broke?" Ethel repeated thoughtfully.

"Yes. Here's the tracing I took of the original, and you see what a deep gouge it made in the wall. Moreover, I have the piece of lead here that he used!" Cliff felt in his pocket and produced the tiny fragment and Ethel took it from him, regarded its circumfer-

ence and then made a few marks with it on the pad lying before her.

"It's a number two," she announced. "About the most-used grade that's made, and if we had the whole pencil it wouldn't help much, for there are probably hundreds like it sold every day. Could I look at this tracing a minute under one of those microscope things of yours?"

Cliff handed her a powerful reading glass and she dropped into the chair beside the desk, bending over the paper while he watched her with renewed respect. She had improved herself wonderfully in her brief vacation, but still the old Ethel was there, the quick brain and intuitive reasoning, which, combined with intrepid courage and an almost superhuman resourcefulness, had enabled her more than once to save the day for her employers.

He told himself defensively that he must soon have realized on his own account the discovery she had made, but it did not diminish his admiration for her lightning perception of the truth, and when she pushed glass and tracing over to him with a little sigh, he asked smilingly:

"What did you expect to find, Ethel?"

"Nothing." She rose. "Some one came in then, didn't there?"

As she vanished through the panel he picked up the tracing again; but if he had not been so deeply preoccupied it is probable that he would have noted that disarming quality in her tone and been warned

by it, as well as by her arrant subterfuge to avoid further conversation.

He had turned the other Shadows loose on the witnesses who might clear up the superficial mysteries which obscured the case, and got rid of Henry by the only means that occurred to him. Now he was free to pursue his own line of investigation, but it apparently led up against a stone wall. The numbers called had availed him nothing, and to try the suburban ones would be an endless task.

Yet it was through the four figures written beside the murdered man's telephone that the problem would be solved, and through them alone! He was as certain of it as in the moment when he had demanded control of the case, and opposition and failure only strengthened his conviction. Somehow, somewhere—!

His buzzer whirred with the short, abruptly ceasing hum that usually summoned him to the council room, and he rose and hurried in, to find it empty. While he halted in surprise the familiar ticking sound came to his ears and he saw a strip of paper unwinding rapidly through its slot. Running it through his fingers he read:

“Young woman just came in, black hair, blue eyes, stunning, Paris clothes, heavy veil thrown back, no solitaire or wedding ring, all upset, been crying, asked for detective in charge Monckton case, refused name, open dictaphone, stand by.”

Cliff obeyed the injunction and Ethel's voice reached him.

"I'm very sorry but it's quite impossible. The members of the firm are all very busy and it's a rule here to receive no one who objects to sending in their card."

"I—I have none with me." The tones of the woman's reply were soft and musical, but Ethel's ticker unreeled a terse contradiction.

"A lie, there is a platinum cardcase hanging from her wrist."

Aloud the secretary was saying pleasantly:

"Here is a pad and pencil that will do as well. If you will write your name, please, I will take it to one of the gentlemen."

"I—it doesn't matter!" The young woman's voice was reluctant, frightened. "I could not possibly have my name mentioned in connection with the affair. No one must know—!"

"The Shadows give no information to the press," Ethel interrupted patiently. "Anything you have to say will be received in the strictest confidence and no one need ever know you have been here."

The paper beneath Cliff's fingers was moving again and a brief sentence leaped out at him.

"Initials on case B.M.N."

At the same moment the voice of the visitor came to him once more.

"If you are quite sure I may depend on that, my—my name is Bertha Naylor. I will talk only with the detective who is investigating this particular case."

Cliff advanced to the telephone and it rang as he took up the receiver.

"Mr. Nichols, a lady named Miss Bertha Naylor would like to speak to you in connection with the Monckton case."

Cliff glanced about him at the somber severity of the room and shook his head hopelessly. Rex's scene-setting abilities were beyond him.

"Show Miss Naylor in immediately, please, Miss Jepson."

The young woman who appeared when the panel slid aside was indeed "stunning," as Ethel had described her. The soft waves of hair beneath her small black hat were dark as midnight, her skin like alabaster and, though lacking in firmness and strength, her features were exquisite.

"You are Mr. Nichols, I believe?"

Cliff bowed and drew forward a chair.

"You wished to see me in reference to the unfortunate tragedy we are investigating? Sit down, please. I have been expecting you."

"Expecting me!" she echoed, sinking into the chair while her face flamed with sudden color.

"You and Mr. Richard Monckton are old friends, I understand," Cliff explained blandly. "You returned to America on the same steamer as our client, didn't you, Miss Norcross?"

"How did you know—?" Barbara Norcross paused, biting her lip. "I cannot imagine who mentioned me to you, but I won't deny my identity; I only ask for your assurance that Mr. Monckton will never know I have come here!"

“He won’t learn of it through us,” Cliff declared as he took the chair opposite. “Have you come to give us some information that will help us to free him? Forgive me for speaking of it but you were at one time engaged to marry Mr. Monckton, were you not?”

She bowed her head.

“The engagement terminated some years ago, Mr. Nichols, but we remained friends.”

“‘Friends?’” He caught up the words. “That is odd. You did not speak for the first two days out on the ‘Tritonia.’”

“Oh, who could have told you!” The color was swept like a receding wave from her face. “We were watched, then! What does it all mean?”

“Not deliberately spied upon, Miss Norcross; both you and our client are well known to many by sight,” Cliff observed. “His arrest for the murder of his father must have been a great shock to you, but of course a grave mistake has been made.” He paused a moment meaningly.

“Of course!” she assented eagerly. Too eagerly, Cliff thought, as he noted the strained, pitiful overtone which had crept into her voice. “That is why I have forced myself to come to you. The relations which formerly existed between us mean nothing now, but as a—a sincere friend I thought you should be informed that he has powerful enemies! I know it, he told me so! They have been trying systematically to ruin him for years, and the financial crisis which

the papers are making so much of to-day was due solely to their machinations!"

"Who are these enemies?" Cliff asked. "A part of your conversation on the last night out was overheard, but did he mention any names?"

"Richard doesn't know, himself!" The intimate name sprang unconsciously from her lips. "He has discovered only that he is the victim of deliberate, personal persecution, and he cannot account for it in any way! He is determined to find out who is responsible and fight them to the bitter end! Surely this stupid, wicked mistake will be rectified at once? He—he will never come to trial?"

"The matter is not as simple as it seems." Cliff was watching the pleading face narrowly. "It would be useless to conceal from you that the authorities have a strong circumstantial case and they will make every effort to rush it through. Many men have bitter personal enemies, Miss Norcross, but I fail to see what bearing that could have on the murder of his father! Mr. Monckton can only hope for release if some one is found to take his place."

"But you said—!" Barbara Norcross spoke in a whisper and her slender body shook. "You, or some one representing The Shadows, said you were confident of proving his innocence! It is in all the afternoon papers!"

"Mr. Hood must have issued that statement without authority from us," Cliff disclaimed. "The law here in America reads that a person is innocent until

proven guilty; but in this case public opinion will hold Mr. Monckton guilty unless sufficient evidence is found to arrest some one else."

"Unless!" She rose slowly from her chair. "And he can only hope for release *if* some one else is found! You don't know! You're not sure! But you must prove that he is innocent! You must!"

In that last despairing cry Cliff learned what he had been waiting for since the beginning of the interview. It was Barbara Norcross who was not sure! She had come there to be reassured and have her secret fears set at rest. In spite of herself, the woman who loved him believed, too, in Richard Monckton's guilt!

CHAPTER X

BEHIND HIGH WALLS

WHEN Phil settled himself in the train bound for Pocantico Hills an hour after leaving the office of The Shadows, a new and shining suitcase of livid tan reposed at his feet and he sported a jaunty spring topcoat that was the last word along the Rialto.

He took from his pocket the two lists he had obtained from the attorney, Grosvenor Hood, and spread them out upon his knee. The first was comparatively long and most of the names were unfamiliar to him, but here and there he came upon one which he recognized as more or less notable in the city and he whistled softly to himself. Eminent jurists, doctors, bankers, a former Governor, a college president, a celebrated minister, an ambassador—Holy Cat! He hadn't any idea the murdered man had been such a big guy, in spite of all that talk about family and money! No wonder the papers gave him most of the front page if these were the kind of people who visited at his house!

The second list was much shorter, but Phil Howe whistled again. Sixteen servants to make things comfortable for one old man alone! What a pipe they must have had of it! There were eight of them in the house under Mrs. Miller; the butler and valet

whom he had caught a glimpse of in the town house that morning, a footman, then the cook, parlormaid, housemaid, kitchenmaid and laundress. The housemaid's name was Nora Delaney, that sounded promising, and the parlormaid was Lucie Regnier—French, of course!

Phil's eyes began to twinkle irrepressibly. He was going to like this job! Besides the chauffeur and coachman, there were a stableman and a garage mechanic, a head gardener and three assistants. Their names were all strange to him but sounded American, and he concluded that the first whose acquaintance he must contrive to make would be the garage mechanic, Matthew Bremer. They would have kindred tastes, for in the days before he had cracked his first crib, Phil had been a driver of no mean ability when the motor races were run over the open roads; and through the mechanic he might get in with the chauffeur, who would doubtless be in soft with the maids at the house.

His first requirement would be accommodation, and when the short run was over Phil made his way to a commercial-looking hotel down the village street, where he registered as "Phil Howell" and deposited his suitcase in a modest room. He was impatient to start upon his quest but decided to make character first; so, with a fresh box of cigarettes and a sheaf of evening papers, he descended to the front porch, where several men were seated enjoying the mild spring air.

They appeared to be natives for the most part, with one or two commercial travelers, yet his sharp eyes detected in a brisk-looking youngster with an aggressive pompadour a cub reporter on one of the great dailies; and a thick-set, heavy-jowled man, chewing reflectively on an unlighted cigar, had "plain-clothes bull" written all over him. It would behoove Phil to watch his step.

The loan of a paper to one of the natives broke the ice and a traveling salesman joined them.

"What's your line, brother?" he asked.

"Nothing like that!" Phil laughed, conscious of the sudden attention of the reporter and the heavy-set man. "My boss wants to extend his chain of garages and sent me up to look over some likely sites around here. The Post Road is overcrowded now with service stations."

"Ain't much use fer public places to keep cars in 'round here," the native remarked. "Folks don't stop fer a day or two and then travel on; the big estates got their own garages and the farmers keep their flivvers in the barn."

"One of the big places here is getting enough free advertising for a summer hotel!" the traveling man said, as he accepted a cigarette from Phil, and the latter's breath caught in his throat but he remained silent. The conversation had started in the right direction, without any steering from him, and he wouldn't bull his luck by an unnecessary word.

"Monckton Manor, you mean?" The native spat

over the rail. "It's three mile out on the Bedford pike—here's a picter of it now, in this here paper! Mr. Monckton was a fine old feller and if his son killed him, like the city police say, 'lectrocution's a darn sight too good fer him! I see the boy 'round here summers myself and he was a limb of Satan, if ever there was one! You'd never have figgered, though, that he'd be ekil to murder!"

The little group of three was augmented by one after another, and the crime was discussed from all its angles, though Phil was careful not to display too much interest in it. After half an hour he got up and strolled off down the street with the newspaper containing the reproduction of Monckton Manor tucked under his arm.

He turned in at the drug store and ordered a phosphate, and under cover of the counter he examined the picture. The house was of brick with a Mansard roof, set in thickly wooded grounds on a sloping hill behind a high stone fence, and was unpleasantly reminiscent of certain institutions of detention Phil had known, save that its top was covered with thick, trailing vines and densely massed shrubbery showed just beyond. He felt sure he should be able to recognize it when he found it and, dropping the paper at his feet, he finished his phosphate and asked the clerk what roads around there were best for motor touring.

"They're all good," was the reply. "Used to be old driving roads in the coaching days with fine pieces of property all around, and most of them are here

yet. The Bedford pike's about the prettiest if you ain't in a hurry; it crosses here at the end of the street and winds around Steeple Hill."

That was all Phil wanted to know, and after an unappetizing dinner in the deserted hotel dining-room, he strolled off in the opposite direction, and skirted the village to the steeply sloping hill he had noted on leaving the drug store. The broad white road was well lighted, and numerous cars passed, but he kept to the path and walked along briskly, till the clustering houses of the village were left far behind and long stretches of hedge and tall iron fences on either side were broken only by ornamental gateways, festooned with massively wrought lamps and lanterns.

Surely he had come more than three miles! Used to the pavements and swarming shops and tenements of the city, Phil found the dark, winding road hard to travel and the empty stillness, accentuated by creepy, unaccustomed night sounds, oppressive and dreary; but he continued doggedly on his way until at last the high, vine-clad stone wall of the picture loomed up beside him and he heaved a sigh of relief.

It couldn't be more than nine o'clock; if he saw a light around the garage he'd take a chance and butt in. Maybe he'd find a crap game going on the quiet; the men outside couldn't be expected to hold a wake because the old guy was gone. Could he have passed the gate?

Phil walked on and on, but the fence seemed never-ending and he was just thinking that the four gar-

deners, or forty for that matter, would not have any pipe, after all, keeping such a huge place in order, when at last he came to the gates.

Instead of approaching them, however, he ducked quickly; for they were open, two cars were drawn up at the side of the road and a voice with a strong Hibernian accent came from the deeper shadows by one of the great stone posts.

"I'd not care if ye riprinted all the pa-pers in the worruld, ye'd not be gettin' past this gate the night, and don't be callin' me Saint Pether agin or I'll break the head av ye!"

A second voice was lifted cajolingly from one of the cars, but it was abruptly silenced by the clang of the heavy gate as it slammed. Phil had climbed with the agility of a cat up a tall maple whose branches swept the wall, and he dropped down upon its top as the reverberation was drowned by the uproar of the departing cars.

Footsteps were crunching along the gravel and a lantern bobbed among the bushes, and keeping his eyes upon it Phil dropped to the soft turf and started to follow it, at a discreet distance, as warily as though he were once more spotting a lay. Once he tripped over an upstanding root, and again an incautious step sent the gravel flying, but the lantern ahead did not stop and he gradually crept up on it till the outlines of a rambling house, far larger than the picture had led him to expect, came into view, with low lights glowing dimly from curtained windows here and there.

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Brighter lights gleamed from a cluster of outbuildings near at hand, toward which the lantern had turned, and Phil was prepared to trail along in its wake when the sudden clamor of dogs made him halt.

It died away as the same harsh voice silenced them and then called out:

“I’m thinking I’d turn thim loose, Matt. Ivery wan’s in that belongs, and they’ll make short work of a stranger!”

Phil Howe waited to hear no more. Bitter experience in his former profession had taught him discretion, and at least he had located the scene of tomorrow’s operations. He turned and slipped off among the trees, making for the wall once more without following the windings of the drive, and he came upon it sooner than he had hoped, at a point evidently farther beyond the gate. Here he ventured to use his flashlight and saw to his relief that there was a gap in the wall, with heaped stones and a mortar bin at one side, showing that repairs were in operation, and he forced apart the wires which formed a temporary barrier and wriggled through the aperture.

A low, startled cry and a soft exclamation in a foreign accent came to his ears as a feminine figure in white, partially obscured by a flowing dark cape, drew hastily back from him.

“Mon Dieu, a robber! We shall be keel as Monsieur’ was—!”

The French parlormaid, Lucie! If she was as pretty as her voice—

“Not a bit of it, Miss!” Phil made his most gallant bow, forgetting that it would be wasted in the darkness. “I’m cousin to Nora Delaney, one of the maids up at the Monckton house here, but they won’t let me get in to see her, and some wild Irishman threatened to turn the dogs out on me! Here, I’ll let you see I’m all right and there’s nothing to be scared of.”

He flashed the light upon himself and then swept it over her for an instant before extinguishing it. She *was* pretty, with her pointed little Gallic face and big, dark eyes! She had been smiling, too; this wasn’t going to be half bad!

A relieved little laugh bubbled out on the air and she murmured:

“Cousin to the good Nora! But perhaps you did not know, *Monsieu’*, that there has been a death, a murder—?”

“Sure I know, but call me ‘Philip!’” the young rascal begged. “Wasn’t I at the very house in town to-day where the old gentleman was killed? I was looking for Nora, thinking they were all in the city still, and not having had a chance to read the paper to-day, and I found the whole place full of police! But you must be Miss Lucie Regnier, I guess? Nora’s spoken about you in her letters.”

“She has not spoken of *you*, *M’sieu’ Philip!*” A pause, then eagerly: “But tell me of what goes on there where poor *Monsieu’ Monckton* was killed? It is terrible that his son should do this thing!”

"Maybe he didn't," Phil suggested. "Did you ever see him?"

"Then why have they arrest' him? No, never have I seen him, but in the house here, in the room of Monsieu', there is a portrait which Mrs. Miller tells me is that of the son, and he does not look like the sort of man to take his father's life! Often have I passed in the hall to see Monsieu' standing before it with so much of sadness—but perhaps you do not know there was an old quarrel between them?"

"Yes. I've read it in all the papers since." Phil intended to waste no time on old stuff. "Were you with them then?"

"I have been here, it is just one year. It is very late, I must go—" Inconsistently she hesitated and then seated herself on a low pile of stones that had been left by the path. "You shall tell me a little of what you see this afternoon!"

"It was all over then." Phil restrained his impatience and sat down beside her, but at a discreet distance. "Didn't you ever hear the old gentleman speak of his son?"

"No, I do not think so, M'sieu' Philip." Lucie paused and then added in a little burst of confidence: "I tell you one strange thing, though. The household, it is already establish' here last spring when Mrs. Miller engage me in the city as parlormaid just after I arrive in this country, and three times in May and June a man comes to see Monsieu'. There are many guests, much entertaining, but always this man he

comes when no one else is here, and Monsieu' takes him into the study and talks with him behind locked doors. Always, too, Monsieu' is ill afterward; not in bed, but he broods to himself and looks so aged and frail. It is many days before he is himself again. Mrs. Miller, she try each time to listen, to hear what is said; I catch her at the door and she is very angry, but I do not care! Me, I am curious, too! The third time this man arrive, it is in the last of June and I remember it is warm in that study, the windows are open, one could stand on the lawn beneath with no one the wiser and hear—! You think it is very wicked of me, no?"

"Perfectly natural!" Phil replied promptly. "Go on; what were they saying?"

"First it is the voice of Monsieu'. 'I tell you, he will kill me yet! I feel it, I know it! All these five years I have waited, thinking that each one would be the end! That boy will be answerable for my death!' I think it is his son he speaks of, for the quarrel has been just five years before last June, your cousin has told me, but I do not comprehend that he means he shall be murdered; not until the news of to-day! The strange gentleman speaks then, but in so low a tone that I do not hear, and after that Monsieu' say: 'Yes, he has threatened that! Mark my words, if I am found dead some day my blood will be upon his head!' I cannot wait to hear more, for the butler calls me and I have fear that I shall be discover'! The man comes no more here to the Manor, not again, but

Monsieu', he is failing with each day; he has changed much, but slowly, and in the last few weeks he goes—how do you say?—all to pieces.

“The butler and footman say he eat nothing and his valet is almost sick with the worry; a light burns in his room all the night long and when I come down at six in the morning, often he is still walking up and down! Two weeks ago Monsieu' receives a cable and for three days he keep to his room and when he appears again he is like a ghost; but he has visitors who arrive for over Sunday and then he manages to be himself while they are here. They depart, and all this week he is never still! He wanders about the house and garden, saying nothing, and always Mrs. Miller is watching! Yesterday morning he receives a message and he goes, and all the day Mrs. Miller is like a madwoman, she flies at one's head! To-day, when the news comes, I comprehend what it is I see in the face of Monsieu' for these many days—it is fear!” She shuddered and rose. “I must go, now; you will assist me through the fence, M'sieu Philip? The gates, they are closed.”

“Of course I will, Lucie!” Phil dared. “Look here, when can I see you again? I was only coming to visit Nora because we're cousins and I haven't seen her in a long time, but it was you I wanted to meet! Nora don't need to know, and I'm staying on here in the village for a few days. Suppose I come tomorrow, right here through this gap in the fence, and bring the finest box of candy I can find? They'll

hardly be at work then, with the old gentleman just dead. Can you slip out for a minute or two with nobody on, and I'll tell you what good movies are coming down at the theater?"

"Monsieu' Philip!" Her tone was scandalized but there was yielding in it, too. "We do not know each other, and Nora might be jealous! Still, for perhaps one little minute—!"

Plodding villageward once more, Phil pondered on what he had learned. Need he go back for further information? Richard had threatened to kill his father and the old gentleman knew he would do it! He had been afraid for his life ever since he received a cablegram a fortnight before—the message which probably warned him of his son's approaching return. On the day Richard landed his father had gone to town to meet his death! Would not this be enough to convince Cliff?

CHAPTER XI

IN THE NEXT ROOM

AT the precise hour when Phil alighted at the station in Pocantico Hills, a tall elderly individual, in garb that faintly suggested a rural clergyman, with a long, lugubrious countenance and graying hair, was interviewing a group of taxi drivers at the entrance to one of the larger piers on New York's lower water front. He was evidently in great perplexity and distress of mind, and although his appearance did not denote a generous fee the men good-naturedly tried to help him solve his problem.

"I was delayed a whole day!" he mourned. "I ought to have been here when the ship got in and now I fear I shall miss my brother! Dear me, I never realized the city was so big and confusing! Surely one of you must have driven my brother to some hotel! 'C. R.' would be the initials on his baggage."

"'C. R.' " One of the chauffeurs pushed his cap back and scratched his head. "I had a party with two children that I took from the boat to the Rockefeller—?"

"No, my brother was alone; Christopher Radwick, his name is, and he'd go to some small hotel, I am sure."

"Maybe Mike would know," suggested a second chauffeur. "Here he comes now with his cab. Seems to me I saw him driving off with a fare that looked something like you, only younger."

"That must have been he!" The questioner's face lighted hopefully. "My brother's baggage would be labeled 'Chicago,' too."

Fortunately Mike did know. When the situation was explained to him and the details of identification added, he exclaimed:

"Sure, I had him! Drove him to the Fresno. 'C. R. Chicago,' eh? That's my fare, all right. Want me to take you there?"

But the anxious brother was already climbing into the taxi, and in a quarter of an hour he was set down before a modest hostelry on a side street just off a teeming avenue.

The taxi dismissed, his demeanor changed as he entered the lobby, and, approaching the desk, he ruffled the leaves of the register idly as he bargained for a room. It developed that he had very definite notions of what would suit him; he mustn't be put up too high on account of fire—the third floor would do but not at the back, he liked the morning sun. Perhaps right in the center of the building, near the elevator—?

The arrangements were made at last, but when he was finally settled in the apartment of his choice and the door securely locked, his behavior, for a visiting clergyman, was extraordinary. He first examined the connecting door in the side wall to the left and, find-

ing it bolted seemingly on the other side, he produced a small gimlet and proceeded to bore a convenient peephole on a level with his eyes, letting the infinitesimal grains of sawdust fall carefully on a newspaper spread on the floor. Next, he gathered this up and returned it and the gimlet to his pocket, then drawing up a chair he prepared himself for a protracted vigil.

It was interrupted by a knock on the door and, thrusting back the chair, he rubbed a moistened forefinger over the tiny but raw hole, and crossed to the entrance leading to the hall. A chambermaid, draggled and weary-looking, stood on the threshold with two grayish towels over her arm. She flushed with surprise and gratification when a dollar was pressed into her hand and the new arrival asked her name in kindly, paternal tones.

"Katie, sir. I think you'll be comfortable. If you want anything else just ring."

"My neighbors—are they quiet people?" he asked. "I'm a poor sleeper, Katie, and if they come in late—?"

"They're both gentlemen, and Mr. Nelson on the right is very old and deaf and don't go out much after dinner. I don't know the name of the party on the left, he only came yesterday, but he didn't leave his room last night—not till this morning and then he looked as if he was sick; he ain't come in since, though he's still holding his room. I don't guess he'll disturb you when he comes back."

This was disquieting news and after she had gone

on her rounds George Roper paced the floor. Had his quarry eluded him, after all? It had been ridiculously easy to trace him here, but what if he did not return? Katie might be mistaken about his remaining in his room all of the previous night, and if he knew anything about the murder it was not remarkable that he should have appeared ill in the morning.

His vague fears, however, were allayed almost at once, for the elevator door clanged and footsteps walking briskly down the hall paused at the next room on the left. George hastily took up his former position at the peephole as a key grated in the lock and a man entered his line of vision.

He was a tall, thin individual, not unlike George himself, in general proportions, but there the resemblance ended, for the stranger must have been at least twenty years younger, with a long nose, pointed chin and a wide low forehead, surmounted by short, thick, lightish hair. His ears were set higher up on his head than in most men and their tops stood out sharply as though strained in the effort to hear.

While his neighbor watched he removed his coat, collar and waistcoat, and rolling up his sleeves he plunged his face and head in a basin of cold water. Then, taking some newspapers from the table where he had dropped them on entering, he drew a chair to the window. Cocking his feet comfortably on the sill he lighted a cigar and proceeded to read for an hour or more.

George noted that his eyes often strayed from the print, however, and for as long as five minutes at a time he would be lost in some reverie of his own that was evidently not a pleasant thought, for his brow was furrowed and his chin stuck out until it almost met the drooping tip of his nose. He studied the first page of each newspaper, then turned to the second page, and after that he flung it aside as of no further interest and took up another.

There was no doubt in George's mind as to what was holding his attention to the exclusion of everything else—the Monckton case. Once when he turned full in the direction of the connecting door the waning light of late afternoon struck his face and the watcher saw that he looked, if not physically ill, at least in deep trouble and perplexity.

At last he rose and took a fresh collar from a drawer, and George Roper picked up his hat, and, waiting until he heard the key turn in the other door, he opened his own and strode to the elevator. As it descended he did not so much as glance at his fellow passenger and in the lobby paused at the cigar stand until the latter had left the hotel, turning west.

Christopher Radwick walked slowly, aimlessly, as though his hour of meditation had brought no lifting of the burden that lay upon his mind; up one street and down another, pausing here and there to gaze absently into a restaurant or lighted shop window, he covered many blocks, but always that unobtrusive, shabby, clerical figure was in his wake, now almost

fifty yards behind, now close at his elbow. It was nearly eight o'clock when he turned into a chop house and ordered a plain but substantial meal; the place was semi-deserted at that hour and the clergyman was not in evidence, but when Radwick left his shadow was again drifting along behind.

The man seemed in a very fever of restlessness. He purchased a standing-room ticket at a musical comedy, but departed before the curtain fell on the second act, only to drop into a motion picture house twenty minutes later; but the screen did not hold his interest, for in a short time he was again on the street.

Seemingly abandoning every effort then to escape from his own thoughts, he halted at an orangeade stand and then went back to his hotel, the shadow thankfully accepting his decision.

If Radwick slept, he was abruptly awakened an hour later, for loud groans issued from the next room and were followed by a faint but insistent tapping on the connecting door.

"What is it?" he called, bending close to the jamb. "Are you ill in there? Do you want me to send to the office for help?"

"No, not that," the answer came in painful gasps. "Sorry to—disturb you. Subject to attacks—know what to do—would you mind coming in for a minute?"

"Right with you!" Radwick replied, and thrusting his arms into the sleeves of his dressing-gown he

padded out into the hall and to the other door, which he found ajar.

The elderly clergyman in a long, white night-shirt lay doubled up across the bed holding his lean stomach with both hands and emitting hollow moans which seemed to come from the tips of his gnarled toes.

"What's the matter? What can I do for you?" Radwick advanced to the bed. "You seem to be in a bad way. Want a doctor?"

"No. Gastritis—something's poisoned me!" the sufferer groaned. "Over there—my bag—sorry bother—find bottle peppermint—"

His voice died away in a distressing paroxysm, and the Samaritan crossed to the worn bag lying open on the floor and searched among a litter of shirts and collars, all somewhat frayed, till he came upon a small phial labeled "peppermint extract."

"This what you want?" He held it so that the sufferer could see. "Do I follow these directions?"

George nodded, rolling his eyes, and Radwick went to the water basin, turning on the cold water and measuring twenty drops of the medicine into a glass.

"That's good!" the patient sighed, when he had drained it. "I ought to get some relief now in a few minutes. Would you mind—been very kind to a stranger—mind sitting with me—just a little while? Maybe have to—repeat dose."

"Glad to have been of any assistance, I am sure." The voice of the neighbor from the next room was well bred and modulated, but he had a habit of hold-

ing his lips stiff and almost immobile as he spoke, although his words were clearly enunciated. "I wasn't sleepy, anyway, and I don't mind staying till you feel better. My name's Radwick. Object if I smoke?"

His hand slipped into the pocket of his dressing-gown and then he glanced down in surprise, as though conscious for the first time of his attire. George sat up with a groan.

"Cigars there on bureau—please, I insist! I'm Dr. Griffith Rhodes, Circleville, Ohio." He pulled himself around straight on the bed, jamming the two thin pillows up behind him, so that he faced his guest over the low footboard.

"Thanks." Radwick selected a cigar from the handful lying on the dresser and, lighting it, seated himself in a chair by the center table directly beneath the light. "No wonder you knew what to take! You believe in the old-fashioned remedies, don't you?"

"Best there are, but I'm not that kind of a doctor. Divinity, not medicine. This is my first vacation in twenty-three years—first time East, too. You come here often, Mr. Radwick?"

"About twice a year." Radwick half closed his eyes in surprised appreciation of the quality of the cigar. "I'm just winding up a trip to Europe."

"Holy Land?" George lifted his head. "Dream of my life, to go there!"

"No, china and porcelain factories. Worcester, Limoges, Dresden—all over. I'm head buyer for a Chicago concern."

George pondered, groaning realistically at intervals. The fellow seemed willing enough to talk, even if he were lying, and glad to have a companion to listen to him. Was it that he wanted to get away as much as possible from himself and his own thoughts? Aloud, he asked:

“Did you have a pleasant voyage home?”

“Pleasant enough; I’m not crazy about the sea. It was smooth for this time of year and the ship was not crowded.” Radwick knocked the ash from his cigar. “Are you feeling a little easier yet?”

“Some.” George clasped his stomach again. “It is a wonderful advantage—travel. What ship did you come home on?”

“The ‘Tritonia.’ ” There was not the slightest hesitation in the reply, but George started realistically.

“Dear me! You don’t say so! Why, that’s the very boat that young man arrived on who went up last night and murdered his father! Perhaps you don’t read the papers? Terrible crime!”

“Oh, yes, I do. You mean the Monckton case, don’t you? Yes, the young man crossed with me, but I’m not acquainted with him.” Radwick spoke with the utmost unconcern. “Nice-looking fellow, quiet, decent sort, to look at him. Couldn’t believe it when the papers came out this morning.”

Confound it! George’s impatient movement was not all assumed. Radwick didn’t deny a thing; instead he seemed actually to have led up to the subject by

volunteering the fact that he'd just returned from abroad.

"Wickedness is usually masked in a pleasant exterior," George remarked sententiously. "I read only the headlines but I struggled to find charity in my heart for the wretched man."

"Oh, well, he's not convicted yet, you know," Radwick reminded him tolerantly. "According to the papers there was every evidence of an attempted burglary and the police aren't infallible."

George looked shocked.

"They are the representatives of law and order!" he retorted firmly. "Did the young man Monckton—I have forgotten his first name—act strangely in any way on board ship—as though he were contemplating crime, I mean? I have never encountered a sinner against the law except minor cases in my small home town, and they were not among members of my congregation."

"Well, I've never contemplated crime, myself, so I don't know how a man would act under those circumstances!" Radwick laughed, but there was a note in his voice that sounded almost sinister to George, and his eyes gleamed with a sort of sardonic amusement. "Very much like other people, I imagine. I didn't notice Monckton in the smoking salon or taking part in any of the deck games, and if he came below for the ship's concert I didn't see him. He promenaded about the deck or sat reading in a chair, occa-

sionally talking to a lady—I didn't hear her name mentioned—and he was regular at his meals in the dining-salon. He sat at the captain's table and I just to starboard of it; and I know he happened to be there whenever I looked up and I never missed the call of the bugle, I can tell you. To be honest, I didn't pay much attention to him."

This, at any rate, was a lie, if Lucian's art dealer was to be believed. It wasn't possible that Radwick could suspect the ailing clergyman of ulterior motives; what could be his object in talking with such seeming frankness and at such length about a matter which he needn't even have mentioned? Was he rehearsing in order to be letter perfect in his story if it were ever necessary to repeat it before a larger and sterner audience?

His interest, in connection with Richard, might have nothing to do with the murder and what led up to it, providing the young man had actually killed his father; George felt that he was pulling on a very slender thread, after all, but orders were orders and it was Cliff's turn. He would make one more effort.

"You've seen more of the world than I have, Mr. Radwick. I've been tied to my little flock for the best years of my life, and I rejoice that I was called to that field, but you should be a better judge of human nature than I. What is your opinion of this affair?"

"Haven't any." Radwick laid the stub of his cigar on the metal ash tray. "It's fifty-fifty to me—burglar or son. We'll see what the trial brings out, if it ever

comes off and I'm where I can get hold of the New York papers at that time; I'm leaving for the Orient in a couple of months for a cheap grade of pottery. I'm not condemning the young man in my own mind, just because he and his father were bad friends and he happened to be alone in the house with the body when he called the police, but neither does the circumstantial evidence prove that a burglar was actually there. It's bad business any way you look at it. Personally I'd rather read the sporting page in the papers, any day, than the horrors. Say, you seem to be resting all right now, and I guess I'll turn in. You look a little drowsy, Doctor, and to-morrow'll be another day. If you should feel sick again, don't hesitate to knock and I'll be with you."

George had forgotten to demonstrate signs of distress during the last quarter of an hour and the other had pleasantly but definitely dropped the one subject which it was to his interest to pursue. Moreover, he did feel sleepy, and Radwick would be right there in the morning, when he could plan his next move.

With every evidence of gratitude for his neighbor's ministrations he said good-night to him, and then lay thinking over the conversation which had just taken place. For the life of him, he couldn't decide about the fellow, but he wished he'd put the confounded light out before he left. George felt too comfortably lazy to do it for himself and yet it bothered his eyes. What was it Radwick had said that was a lie? Somehow he couldn't quite remember. . . .

A patient, prolonged knocking on the door aroused him at last to partial wakefulness and he saw that the electric bulbs had taken on a strange, theatric, orange glow in the long beams of sunlight coming in at the window.

"Come in!" he called sleepily, and Katie opened the door and paused.

"Are you all right, sir?" she asked anxiously. "All the morning I've been knocking but you didn't hear, and when I see the electric light still shining under the door, just now, I thought maybe I'd better call the house detective—!"

The word "detective" brought George to his full senses and he sat up abruptly.

"All the morning!" he echoed. "What time is it now?"

"Four in the afternoon, sir."

He stifled a most unclerical ejaculation and his glance darted toward the connecting door.

"The gentleman in there—?" he paused. "Dear me, what can he think! I had an engagement to take lunch with him."

"That's funny!" Katie observed. "Maybe he left word for you at the office, though. He checked out at eight o'clock this morning."

CHAPTER XII

“WRONG NUMBER!”

AN hour after Barbara Norcross had left him, Cliff Nichols journeyed downtown to the picturesque, grim old building where those awaiting indictment and trial for the more serious crimes were incarcerated, and he entered with mingled emotions. Once by the merest chance—and wholly undeserved luck—he had avoided capture and detention in the Tombs because of some crisp new bills that had appeared in circulation under mysterious circumstances, and even yet the memory made him shudder.

He presented his credentials and five minutes later was shaking hands with his client in the visitor's room. Richard Monckton, now that the blow had fallen, had regained his composure, and although pale and haggard he was calm.

“I appreciate your coming so soon, Nichols,” he said. “But you can have little to tell me, and no news is not good news in a time like this.”

“I can only tell you that the full strength of our organization is working for you, Mr. Monckton,” Cliff replied gravely. “Naturally, at our interview last night, you were too agitated to go fully into details, and every moment was precious, but we explained to you that we could accept your case only on the con-

dition of absolute frankness. I have come to you now for additional information that only you can give us."

He had lowered his voice because of the guard stationed at the door, and Richard frowned.

"I think I told you my every move from the moment of landing from the steamer late yesterday afternoon." He appeared to be reflecting. "I know I made every effort not to omit anything. I'll be only too glad to tell you anything I can, of course."

"You told us that your affairs were in a crucial financial state and ruin stared you in the face, but you did not say that it was due, not to the ordinary luck of the game nor lack of judgment on your part, but to deliberate persecution." Cliff spoke slowly and his client's eyes flashed.

"I didn't see why I should, since it had nothing whatever to do with the murder of my father!" he exclaimed. "I'd only realized the fact, had it practically proved to me, a short time before I sailed and I came home to fight! It's my quarrel, though, and when I get out of here I'll take care of it!"

"That's what the gangster says, Mr. Monckton, when he lies dying on a hospital cot with a stab in the back and he's asked for the name of the man who has done him to death! 'Civilization and breeding don't go very far under the skin with any of us!'" Cliff Nichols smiled but his tone held a more dominant note. "Who is trying to ruin you, and why?"

"I wish to heaven I knew!" Richard clenched his hands. "I only know that some faction, some indi-

vidual, is out to get me, has been for years, and with no reason that I can conjecture! They've spent a huge sum doing it, for I've wriggled out and turned the tables on them more than once, and it's not done yet!”

“Have you the slightest idea of their identity, even without a shred of proof?” Cliff persisted and his client shook his head.

“I haven't the remotest inkling! That's what makes it all the more inexplicable.”

“You told some one, not forty-eight hours ago, that some one else had turned up everywhere you went, dogging you all over Europe. Who was it, Mr. Monckton?”

“I said that!” Richard's eyes narrowed and his agitation was suddenly quelled. “Who told you I did, Nichols? Not—not the person I was talking to?”

“No. The conversation was overheard. You have not answered my question.”

“I don't know who the man was—some agent of the influence at work against me, I suppose.” There was every appearance of frankness in his manner now. “I can't even say how far his personal operations extended beyond watching my every move; but in every city, at every hotel, every railroad station and steamship landing, there the chap was practically at my elbow! These were only public places, where he had as much right as I and he never attempted to accost me; in fact he didn't appear to even see me! I couldn't

complain, even when I realized that it was more than mere coincidence. I thought, at first, of demanding an explanation from him but then I decided to wait and find out what his game was. I didn't connect the fact that all my plans fell through with his continued presence, until just at the last, when a broker of unimpeachable reputation, with whom I had great hopes of concluding negotiations, refused my proposition and as much as told me he had been warned off, that interests too powerful for him to buck had turned down their thumbs. Then I saw what that constant espionage meant—why, the fellow even sailed on the same steamer for home!”

“Did you take the trouble to look him up on the passenger list?” Cliff asked. “His name there was Christopher Radwick, wasn't it?”

“Yes! What have you found out about him?” Richard demanded.

“Nothing more than you as yet, if you have told me everything, but we are having him traced.” Cliff bent forward and lowered his voice still more. “Mr. Monckton, you'll have to forgive me if I mention the name of a woman—several women, in fact—and trust me that it is absolutely necessary. They will undoubtedly be brought into your trial if we are unsuccessful in preventing your indictment. First, I want to ask you about a certain lady. We know, in common with the rest of the world, of your engagement to Miss Norcross and that that engagement was subsequently broken; we know that you and she met on the 'Tri-

tonia’ and the question I want to ask is—are you engaged to her now?”

There was a pause, and then Richard said slowly and as though choosing his words with infinite care:

“I am not engaged to be married to Miss Norcross or any one else. No woman in this world is bound to me by word or thought.”

“Were you ever engaged to Miss Mary Andros?”

“I never even proposed marriage to the lady, nor did it ever occur to me that she would have accepted me!” Richard replied with a touch of hauteur. “Nichols, your people appear to have been very zealous in unearthing gossip concerning my private affairs and those of others, but I could wish the same energy and cleverness had been expended in the effort to find the murderer of my father!”

“My dear Mr. Monckton, the police accuse you of framing the evidence of the burglar’s presence. If such a theory is plausible to them, and to the public at large, might not another have preceded you, and having, for some reason, committed the murder, planted that evidence? I, personally, believe the crime was the work of a common thief, caught in his depre-dations by your father, but every possibility must be thoroughly canvassed. Incidentally, no possible stone is being left unturned to find the burglar.”

Cliff had spoken with grave sincerity, and his client’s lowering face changed.

“Pardon me!” he said quickly. “I’m on edge, and this all seems so utterly beside the point that I lost

my temper. I suppose I do not yet realize my position, but it is infinitely distasteful to me to bring the names of women into this hideous affair!"

"That is why you told us the quarrel with your father was caused by your refusal to become a banker?" Cliff countered.

"Yes." Richard's pallor quickened with a tinge of dull red. "That was a contributory cause, though; it was the supreme disappointment of my father's life that I would not keep up the institution we had founded."

"We won't go further into that now, then, but I want some information about your father's household. Let us begin with Mrs. Miller. She appears to be rather an unusual type for a housekeeper."

"She is. She was a country girl, I believe, and married the rural school-teacher, who obtained a position in the local branch of a banking concern and rose rapidly, being advanced to the parent house here in town and subsequently coming to our concern. He held a responsible position when he died fifteen years ago, and Mrs. Miller had done much to further it; but I believe they had lived up to his salary, and she was left with practically nothing. A position was offered her, but she refused it and disappeared for five years, then came to my father.

"She shrank from any semi-public position and wanted to obtain one where she might remain in the strictest seclusion, and the upshot was that she came to our home, and, I believe, has managed it admi-

rably.” Richard paused. He had spoken with evident reluctance but with as evident an effort to be impartial, and with a reservation that Cliff mentally stored away for future reflection. “My father’s valet and the butler and cook are the only remaining house servants who were there when I left home, and the coachman and head gardener out at the Manor—at least Hood tells me they are still there, and he visited both the town and country houses occasionally. I cannot speak, of course, for the newer servants, but I am sure the old ones are thoroughly reliable.”

“We shall look up those who have entered your father’s service since your departure, and their associates, also the servants of any of his house guests,” Cliff announced. “It is possible, of course, that the burglar was working alone, but in the majority of cases they have a confederate inside who tips them off. Now, to go back for a moment to the man who followed you through Europe and home again. You saw him fairly often; did he have rather a narrow, pointed face with protruding ears? Did you ever see him speak? I say ‘see’ because I want to know if there was any peculiarity of expression when he talked.”

Richard stared.

“You chaps are wizards! That’s the very fellow; and the peculiarity about his expression when he talked was that there wasn’t any! His lips seemed carved of wood and never moved! I thought you said you knew no more about him than I did!”

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"We don't!" Cliff smiled. "We've managed to obtain that much of a description of him, that's all. I wanted you to verify it. Mr. Monckton, I have told you frankly what we have discovered that you did *not* tell us; I appreciate your reticence, but have you anything to add to your story of last night?"

"What do you mean?" Richard seemed honestly surprised. "Don't you think if I were concealing anything, for any possible reason, I'd know now how useless it would be, with your organization at work?"

He spoke lightly, but the compliment did not turn his questioner from his purpose.

"I mean in respect to the reason which brought you to your family home last night. Was the purpose other than the gratification of a mere impulse to see it once more?"

Richard drew in his breath sharply, but for the moment made no response and a brief silence fell.

"I hadn't the slightest idea of encountering any one, nor did I wish to remove any souvenir of the past, if that is what you are getting at," he said at last. "I wanted only to feel its atmosphere about me again, just for an hour. That is the only explanation I can give you."

This terminated the interview and as he made his way back uptown to the office of The Shadows, Cliff Nichols went over every phase of it in his mind. When asked pointblank about his possible reëngagement to Miss Norcross, Richard had said no woman was bound to him by word or thought. Had he not

meant that, under the hideous, newly arisen circumstances, Miss Norcross was tacitly released from any agreement? His eagerness when he asked if Cliff had seen and talked with her had been undisguised; was he even then waiting for some word or sign from her?

One fact was plain; he did not like Mrs. Miller. He had spoken of her with too obviously labored fairness, as though consciously, courteously omitting what might appear detrimental to her; but her presence in his father's house was all too evidently unwelcome to him, and Cliff could read between the lines.

He had begged the final question also, and Cliff realized that if any motive other than the idle impulse he had given existed, he would never reveal it.

But Richard Monckton was innocent of the crime with which he was charged! Cliff's conviction had received its deepest confirmation during this latest talk with his client. The young man's own attorney, his friends and acquaintances, even the woman he loved, might believe him guilty, together with the other members of The Shadows, but although Cliff stood alone, he would win his case!

Yet he was not alone! Ethel believed staunchly, too, in Richard's innocence, and in the past she had proved herself an ally not to be despised. With her to aid him, unknown to the rest of the organization, even to Rex, how much easier would his task be! She had brought off her most brilliant coups in moments of rank insubordination; could she be depended

upon now to obey orders implicitly, and hold in stern check her propensity for assuming the initiative?

When he inserted his key in the office door and threw it back, she glanced up hurriedly from her desk, and he thought she looked flushed and eagerly interested; but he did not notice the almost surreptitious gesture with which she replaced the telephone receiver. His thoughts were filled with the new idea which had come to him and he demanded without preamble:

“Any of the rest come in again, Ethel?”

“No, Mr. Nichols. There haven’t been any messages, either.” She gazed at him in surprise as he drew a chair close to her desk.

“Then I want to have a little talk with you. I have work for you to do, lots of it, on this case of ours, but I can’t use you except on one condition—”

“Oh!” she interrupted, clasping her hands. “You mean it? I’ll do anything, and I know the condition, of course! I give you my word that this time I’ll keep it! I won’t do a thing you don’t want me to and I’ll mind my own business, I will, truly!”

“That wasn’t what I referred to, although it’s imperative of course. I’m afraid I haven’t much faith in your ability to keep out of mischief, but I’ll risk it! Ethel, do you think Mr. Monckton killed his father?”

“Why, Mr. Nichols, you know I don’t! I can’t help what the police think, he didn’t do it! I wouldn’t care who said so, I know it happened just the way he told us!”

Her tone was indignant and Cliff smiled.

“That’s the point! We know he’s innocent, you and I, but we’re the only people in the world, apparently, who do think so! The rest of The Shadows have deserted us, even Mr. Powell. Oh, they’re all working still under my direction, but in their hearts they feel that it’s useless, that our client himself committed the crime! Ethel, we two stand alone, and if you come in with me you’ve got to promise solemnly to keep it a secret. No one must know, not even Mr. Powell, till it’s all over. Is that clear? If there’s a chance of their suspecting, you must pretend to go away again, on any pretext you like. That’s my condition, and if you don’t choose to meet it—we won’t say anything more about it.”

For a long minute there was silence while Ethel sat with bowed head, thinking hard, and when at last she spoke it was as though reasoning aloud.

“I owe everything to Mr. Powell, who found me and took me out of—of what I was doing, and it’ll seem sort of horrid not to tell him; but then if you *order* me not to, I’ll be minding him after all, for he told me to do whatever I was told by the one who was in charge of each case. I don’t see how he can even think Mr. Monckton murdered his father, for he never makes mistakes; but then perhaps he hasn’t had time to figure it all out for himself,” she added loyally. “Anyway, I promise that no one shall know I am doing anything more than just the regular office work here, even if I have to take another vacation! I won’t do anything *more* on my own hook, Mr. Nichols, if—

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if you'll just let me call up a few more numbers; I was doing that when you came in, and I've been at it since you started downtown."

"More numbers!" Cliff slumped back in his chair and stared, as with a little smile she lifted the receiver.

"Hello? Six-o-nine-o Chatham, please. . . . Chatham Six-o-nine-o. . . . Hello, is that you, Sadie? . . . Miss Cohen. . . . She doesn't? What number is this? That's funny, isn't that the Sobun Cleaning Company? . . . Oh, O'Regan's Garage? Excuse it, please; wrong number!"

"Of course it was!" Cliff exclaimed, as she turned to him again. "We're after Six-o-nine-nine!"

"Are we?" Ethel's eyes danced. "Better look again at that tracing you made, Mr. Nichols. That pencil broke, all right, but not after the last 'nine' for there wasn't any! That's why I asked to see it under the magnifying glass, to make sure. The lead broke in forming the loop of the last 'o' and straggled down in what looked like the tail of a nine, but it wasn't. We've been calling up the wrong number!"

CHAPTER XIII

A SHRED OF BLUE SERGE

““**T**HE wrong number!”” Cliff repeated in dazed incredulity. Then with an ejaculation he sprang from his chair and rushed into his study, from which came the rustle of paper, clinking of reading glasses and then a prolonged silence, while Ethel waited demurely.

When at length he reappeared, chagrin struggled with mounting hope in his expression, and he cried:

“You win, Ethel! I can't see for the life of me how I made that mistake, but it is an 'o' as you thought! It means we've all our work to do over again, but a fresh chance to find a clew. We'll keep this to ourselves, for none of the others are working on the first number, except Henry, and we'll soon have him back again! Now, what exchanges have you called, already?”

His prediction was verified in another hour with the reappearance of a thoroughly disgusted medical expert, who plumped himself down in the nearest chair, puffing and glaring in speechless resentment.

“Hello, Henry! What's that you've got there?” Cliff eyed the large, legal-looking envelope clutched in one fat hand, and Henry held it out.

“A clerk was asking the elevator boy just now where

our office was, and I relieved him of this. Said he was from Grosvenor Hood. If ever I tackle such a job again—!”

“Oh, the duplicate lists I wanted of the servants employed at Monckton Manor, and those of the guests who stayed there.” Cliff glanced rapidly through them and then looked up. “Did you find number 826?”

“I did!” Henry Corliss announced with unwonted bitterness. “It was a dog hospital and a hiding-place for stolen thoroughbreds, if I don’t miss my guess! The big bruiser left in charge by the fake vet. must have got a hunch that I was a dick, for he told me to get out or be thrown out! It’s the third bawling I’ve had to-day over those confounded numbers—!”

“Never mind, it’ll be the last,” Cliff assured him consolingly. “I’ll have to ask you to do some work that’s a little out of your line, though, Henry, for the rest of us are all busy. In this list of De Puyster Monckton’s guests since he opened the country house last month, only four ladies are mentioned, three of whom brought maids with them, but we’ll leave them aside for the time being. The gentlemen all brought valets and two of them chauffeurs, but among them all there are just three that I think will bear looking up now. You’ll find them all here in the city, if they’re still in the same situations. I want a line on Judge Abner Francis’ valet, whose only name here is ‘Isaac,’ Dr. Lowell Kibbe’s chauffeur, Paolo Galli, and Mr. Waldron Ingram’s valet, Hugh Brinsley. You’ll find

the judge and the doctor in the 'phone book and Waldron Ingram is the president of the Citizens and Aliens Trust Company."

"Hah!" Henry snorted. "And am I to go to the basement door and try to sell patent medicines to 'em? That's the only way I know!"

"That wouldn't work, in this case." Cliff repressed a smile. "Go directly to their employers, show your credentials, state that we are investigating the murder on behalf of Richard Monckton and ask for an interview incognito with these valets and this chauffeur, in order to quiet some suspicions we have about the servants at the Manor. That will do for an excuse."

"And what do you want me to find out when I do talk to 'em?" Henry asked skeptically but with returning good nature.

"Study them!" Cliff responded. "You know a crook when you see one, don't you? I want to know if 'Isaac' and Hugh and the chauffeur are on the level and not spotters for some gang."

"God A'mighty, ain't you given up the idea yet that there was a real burglar?" Henry rose wearily. "I might as well be on my way and get it over, but you're drilling a dry hole, Cliff, sure as you're alive!"

"You heard, Ethel?" Cliff asked with a shrug after the medical expert had departed upon his uncongenial task. "That's the way they all feel!"

"Don't you care, Mr. Nichols!" Ethel returned blithely. "It's their own fault if they miss the big show, for we're going to find that man!"

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They spent a busy hour calling up the various exchanges, but 6090 seemed to bring as little definite result as the former number had done, and Cliff rose impatiently at last.

"Ethel, I'm going to run up to the Monckton house once more. There are only a few calls yet for you to try, and I'll be back before dinner-time."

"All right!" She smiled up at him with undaunted enthusiasm. "I'm sure I'll have some news for you when you come. I can feel it, just like I sort of knew we'd have something big, and couldn't keep away any longer!"

Her spirits were infectious and Cliff Nichols felt unaccountably cheered and encouraged as he left her and started uptown. It seemed impossible that, with only those hastily scrawled numbers to serve as a clew, they would be able, in all the teeming millions of the city, to lay their hands on the murderer of De Puyster Monckton; and yet his faith in the little blue-eyed ex-shoplifter had been confirmed. She was more of a handwriting expert than he, and if anything came of her discovery, the credit should be hers alone!

The old house hidden away in its clump of trees loomed gloomy and foreboding in the early spring dust as again he turned in at the gate and proceeded up the drive. The burly Cerberus of the morning was still on guard at the entrance door and greeted him with a grinning nod.

"Back again?" he asked. "Got some fresh dope on that burglar of yours?"

“You boys will find out when you try to indict my client!” Cliff laughed, returning the other’s manner. “Is the Miller woman here yet?”

“Upstairs, somewhere. That old guy who came with her, Monckton’s valet, had a kind of a fit and they took him to the hospital; she says nothing’s missing from the house as far as she can see. Uppish old dame, but she must have been some looker as a girl!”

Leaving the plain-clothes man to his grudging admiration, Cliff mounted the front stairs, but went softly along the hall and descended the rear ones without meeting any one. Here sounds of wordy strife reached him from the tradesmen’s door, where a police official was evidently haranguing a ubiquitous reporter, and Cliff made his way hastily through the store-rooms and pantries to where the pane of glass had been removed from the upper sash.

There were smudges of dirt, as Phil had reported, still lying on the floor and soiling the sill, but the most sanguine seeker for clues could not have declared positively that they were footprints. They had been scuffed about by the numerous police and detectives, and the ground and shrubbery outside were torn and trampled.

It looked unpromising for any neglected clew but Cliff raised the sash and climbed cautiously out, dropping to the soft turf a few feet below. The springing grass of the newly-grown lawn would have held no trace of a single prowler underlying the print of many feet, but a gravel path wound near, coming from

the direction of the stable and garage, and branching off toward the hedge interlacing the bars of the iron fence, and glancing quickly about him Cliff started for the boundary.

It was along this path that the thief must have come, probably from the rear, back of the garage; he had noticed that open lots, strewn with bowlders and rank undergrowth, stretched beyond and the intruder must have planned his method of approach with the least likelihood of being seen. But his exit was not as he must have intended; in a desperate panic because of the thing which he was leaving behind he would have made for the nearest wall, the most direct way to the subway station, four blocks to the north.

The previous night had been moonless but clear, and the starlight would have been bright enough to disclose that path; surely fear-winged feet would have found and followed it instinctively.

Distant lights were springing up now at evenly spaced intervals beyond the hedge and fence. The street lamps were lighted but day had not yet gone, and Cliff kept as much in the shelter of trees and tall clumps of bushes as he could to avoid the searching eyes of the patrol on the lookout for reporters and morbid sightseers.

Within a few yards of the fence, the path turned abruptly to double back around a flower-bed toward the front of the house, but Cliff left it and made straight for the hedge. It was well-clipped but very old and the brown spaces in the tender green showed

where it was dying out. Cliff, bending low, moved along beside it, then turned and retraced his steps.

Somewhere along here, he was morally certain, the murderer must have crashed through the hedge and scaled the fence, the sharp iron spikes of which were raised several feet above, but the dusk was deepening rapidly and there were any number of gaps in the hedge through which the fellow might have wormed his way.

After all, how could he hope, in the gathering darkness, to come upon anything that eyes far better trained than his would not have found in broad day? Cliff felt discouragement descending again upon him, and straightened to turn once more toward the house, when, as he raised his eyes, they fell upon something that held them transfixed.

It was just a limp, dark object caught on one of the spikes of the fence and fluttering in the evening breeze. It looked like a shred of cloth but unless the wind had carried it and impaled it there it could only have been torn from the apparel of some one who climbed over, carelessly or in frantic haste. The hedge beneath was an unbroken mass of green, almost black now in the shadows, and revealed no sign of damage; but when Cliff assailed it the twigs, elastic with new sap, bent limberly and sprang back into place.

He forced them aside and drew himself up the bars of the fence to reach and capture the fluttering shred of cloth. Then he dropped quickly down again and crouched beside the hedge immovable, for footsteps

crunched along the path from the front and the low murmur of voices came to his ears.

"It might have been, I couldn't say for sure. I haven't heard him speak in six years." The voice was unctuously smooth. "The call came at seven, and I did think it odd that he wouldn't leave his name."

They were talking of the telephone call at Monckton Manor from the unknown man on the night before! The speaker must be Peter Downes, the butler; the footsteps were uneven, short, trotting ones beside slower, heavy strides. Cliff reconnoitered warily and saw that it was indeed the butler, with the policeman who that morning had been stationed at the door of the dining-room. They were rounding the sharp curve in the path, going toward the garage, and the officer's deeper tones reached him even more distinctly.

"'Twould be better if you could swear to it," he growled. "We'll give you a chance to hear him talk downtown and then maybe you'll be certain."

"Perhaps so and perhaps not." There was a world of meaning in the raised inflection. "I've got myself to think of and I've held my place for eighteen years. I'd not like to make a mistake that would lose it for me and bring me no thanks."

The voice trailed off into silence as the men disappeared, but Cliff had heard enough to illuminate the situation. It was the crudest attempt to influence a possible witness that he had ever listened to, but it showed that the authorities were not as sure of being

able to make out a case as they had appeared. If they had decided on open bribery they would have employed a more adroit emissary than the blunt policeman, but it was plain that Peter Downes would not be averse to an offer.

He must be reckoned with, Cliff reflected, as he crept back to the house and slipping in the window, closed it after him. That snatch of conversation might prove of value to their client if he were arraigned before the murderer was found. That he would be, sooner or later, came with renewed conviction to Cliff's mind; that rag of cloth, now reposing in his pocket and which he had not even examined as yet, brought his confidence back in a wave, and there was an added jauntiness in his manner as he hastened to the front door.

"On your way already?" the detective demanded jocosely. "Didn't find your second-story worker's visiting card or a lock of his hair, did you?"

"Something more personal than that!" Cliff smiled in an infinitely superior way. "It's no wonder you boys grab the first person in sight to hang something on, when you never lift your noses from the ground."

His tone was bantering, but the other's gaze sharpened with suddenly aroused interest and he could feel it following him as he walked briskly to the gate.

He could scarcely restrain his impatience to examine his find, and when once more the subway was reached the ride downtown seemed interminable; but he arrived at the office of The Shadows, at length, to find

Ethel still in sole possession and wrestling with the telephone.

"I've got just one number left, Mr. Nichols," she remarked. "I had to hold Queensbridge nearly half an hour before it answered and then it was a warehouse!"

"Your intuition didn't register this time, did it?" he asked. "We'll call that last number after a bit, but first I want to show you what I've found! Come into my study where there's a strong light."

The torn fragment of cloth was of the cheapest dark blue serge, worn threadbare and shiny, with more cotton than wool in its weave; but the two could not have handled it more tenderly had it been the rarest fabric in the world, and Ethel would hear of no suggestion that it had been blown on the wind and caught by the fence spike.

"That's a piece of a trouser leg!" she declared. "You can see where it's ripped from the seam on this side, and if it hadn't been so old that it gave, the man would probably have been found tied up in a knot on the other side of that fence with a broken kneecap! He's left-handed and his pants are torn; that's something to go on, if he hasn't been able to get hold of another pair; and couldn't you tell about how tall he was from the distance between those figures on the wall, and the floor? People usually write on a level with their eyes unless they're looking down, don't they?"

“By Jove, you’re right again!” exclaimed Cliff. “Anybody else but me would have thought of that at once, but I was so taken up with the writing itself that it never occurred to me. The fellow was rather tall, I should say—those figures were scrawled a little above the transmitter, as I remember, and quite far out at one side.”

“That means his arms are kind of long!” Ethel nodded. “He’s farsighted instead of the other way, and he isn’t used to bending over a desk—he likes plenty of room. Mr. Nichols, we’re getting on!”

“But that number!” Cliff thrust the fragment of cloth into the table drawer. “There’s one still that you haven’t tried? What exchange is it? I’ll give it a ring now myself.”

“Parkside,” she responded promptly. “That’s up in that neighborhood of cheap flats around Hillside Park, isn’t it? I left it till the last because they aren’t exactly tenements like you’d expect a crook of that sort to come from.” Cliff turned to the telephone beside the array of inks and acids on his table.

“Parkside, 6090,” he spoke into the transmitter and then added in an aside: “Don’t go away, Ethel. I may need you.”

There was a pause, and the girl beside him drew in her breath sharply while he waited in mounting suspense.

“Doesn’t answer,” the mechanically twanging tones of “Central” came to him at length.

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"They *must* answer!" Cliff retorted with a desperate eagerness. The last number left! "Keep ringing them, please. I'll hold the wire!"

A faint, whirring buzz sounded in his ears and then there came suddenly a small, sweet, piping voice.

"Hello! Who is it?"

A child! Cliff's heart sank like lead, but he asked.

"Is Harry there?"

"No, thir," the childish treble lisped. "You don't mean my uncle Charlie, do you?"

"I mean Harry. I was told to call him up there. What is the address of this number?"

"I guess he must be one of Uncle Charlie's friends; so many of them call up here at our house. It's Eighty-four West One Hun'ed and Tenth Street; mamma only had the telumphone put in last week 'cause Uncle Charlie wanted it. When she comes in do you want me to tell her anything for the other man?"

The child was all by herself and lonesome, evidently, glad of some one to talk to. It seemed hopeless ground but Cliff ventured on a bold stroke.

"Your uncle Charlie telephoned to Harry last night and gave him the new number. Harry expected to be there and I was to call him. I guess your mamma knows."

"I gueth tho." The child seemed to lisp only when in doubt or embarrassed. "Uncle Charlie expected somebody else but they didn't come and he was awful—oh, I forgot! I wathn't to dare thay a word!

I'll tell Uncle Charlie thombody called up for Harry, Good-by."

The distant receiver clicked in scared haste, and Cliff faced his new partner with shining eyes.

"We've got it at last, Ethel! Put down this address, quick!" He repeated it to her, together with the gist of the brief conversation, and added: "That little girl's Uncle Charlie expected somebody last night and when they didn't appear he was either in a rage or scared stiff! I fancy the latter, since she was warned not to mention it. The man he expected was the man who killed De Puyster Monckton!"

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNEXPECTED REUNION

ON Saturday afternoon, when George Roper was awakened by Katie the chambermaid to learn that the kind Samaritan of the night before had stolen a march on him, he lay for some time after she had left the room, mentally kicking himself.

He saw it all, now! Radwick had been "on," from the moment that his new next-door neighbor stepped into the elevator to descend with him late the previous afternoon, but to be sure he was trailed he had taken that devious, apparently aimless stroll, and a pretty dance he had led George!

That accounted for his restlessness during the evening when he had popped in and out of the theatre and moving picture house, and he was assured of the truth and prepared to face the issue when he started back to the hotel!

George emitted a far more realistic groan than during his simulated suffering of the night before. What a complacent, self-satisfied old fool he had been! How Radwick must have laughed in his sleeve all the time!

He'd doped that dose of peppermint, all right, and then sat there calmly waiting for it to take effect, and

meanwhile amused himself by giving George rope enough to hang himself; and he'd done it, higher than a kite!

The chagrined Shadower writhed in spirit as he recalled that conversation. Radwick hadn't noticed Richard particularly on board ship—oh, no! He wouldn't express any opinion about the murder for a confoundedly good reason; and he'd had the gall to laugh when he said that, never having contemplated crime himself, he couldn't tell how a man would act under such circumstances!

So he'd been played for a sucker, had he? George flung the covers wrathfully aside and sprang out of bed with an energy that belied his years. The game wasn't over yet, even though he'd been out-played, and he'd show that long-nosed, wall-eyed, son-of-a-sneak who the come-on was before he was through!

Fate and his own cocksure carelessness had given him two stiff handicaps; the other man knew him, and knew his purpose, even if he couldn't know what faction he represented. Moreover, Radwick had an eight-hour start and would cover his tracks as he hadn't bothered to do when he left the pier.

It didn't matter. George had a purely personal as well as professional motive now, and nothing should stand in his way!

As he dressed hurriedly and rang for coffee he gave the situation earnest thought. He could only hope to get on Radwick's trail again by outguessing him, and if the fellow thought he was a natural born fool, so

much the better. Radwick was shrewd, alert to grasp a situation and quick in his decisions, with a devilish sense of humor and almost uncanny self-possession; what would be his reaction to the knowledge that he was under espionage, and what step would he take beyond the initial one of departing in short order?

Assuredly he would not go far from the scene of the crime, at least until the man he had trailed for so many months was indicted for it. Whatever his object, he had remained here before he knew that he was in turn being watched, and he must continue to do so.

Descending to the lobby, George Roper bought a cigar and newspaper, and seating himself in a big leather chair near the entrance he smoked and scanned the headlines of the afternoon's news. There were no developments of any moment in the Monckton case. The authorities gave sanguine but vague assurance that the problem would be cleared up immediately and the murderer put on trial in record time; but the reporters themselves looked upon the arrest of Richard Monckton as a material witness as being conclusive and without fear of libel expressed their views more definitely, while the sob sister of the sheet came out with the usual maudlin tale, enhanced by a photograph of Miss Barbara Norcross borrowed from the society editor.

The Shadows, Inc., a hitherto unknown firm of private detectives employed by Richard Monckton to demonstrate the fact that his father had been killed

by a burglar, came in for more or less facetious comment. They had been approached but had declined to grant an interview.

George smiled grimly to himself as he pictured the form that declination had probably taken if Ethel had been the one to deliver it. Then he cast the paper aside, and rising, strolled over to a thickset individual in light tweeds, with a purple necktie forming a background for an impressive but off-color diamond.

"You're the house detective?" he asked in his most urbane manner. "Have a cigar?"

"Thanks." The gorgeously arrayed person nodded. "That's me."

"Come up to my room a minute." One ministerial eye closed suggestively. "This is about the time of day when a few years ago it was customary to take a little nourishment and I find it difficult to accommodate myself to modern ways in my declining years."

The detective chuckled and followed him to the elevator, and when they were settled behind the locked door with the flask half-emptied, George remarked:

"That was a queer character you had in the next room here. 'Radwick,' he called himself. He cleared out in a hurry this morning."

"Sure, but he paid up."

"I did, you mean!" George announced quickly. "He borrowed twenty-five from me last night, but I didn't know it was for that purpose; he was going to show me the city."

"Yeah? There a lot of birds like that floating around and we do our best to protect the guests from them, but if they fall for the old line and don't squeal till after the other guy's made his getaway it ain't up to us!" The detective spoke pleasantly enough but with an air of finality. "You're lucky he didn't nick you for more."

"Oh, I'm not complaining." George poured another drink for his guest. "I'd just kind of like to know where he went."

"To Chicago, I guess. Anyway, that's where he's booked from, and when he settled his bill he asked if he could get to the Grand Central in ten minutes; that's when the flyer starts."

"Chicago, eh?" George shrugged. "It wouldn't do me any good to follow him for that twenty-five! Maybe you could tell me of some of the sights here? I've never been East before."

When the detective had descended to his duties once more, George packed his bag, paid his bill and asked at the desk when the next train left for Circleville, Ohio. The last half-hour had not been wasted; the house dick had been fixed by Radwick, that was plain. Otherwise he could have said that the departed guest simply walked out of the hotel with his bag, as George himself was doing, and let it go at that. Unless he was vastly mistaken, Radwick at the present moment was not more than a block or two nearer Chicago than when he left, for he'd stick around to get a line on what his follower would do.

What George did do was to proceed to the corner, and pause after rounding it to glance swiftly up and down the avenue. The roar of the elevated road overhead was deafening, now that the day's traffic had thinned, and he hurried to the station a block down to board the first uptown train, aware that his clerical garb and even the shabby bag he carried rendered him an easily identified figure.

But it was more than an hour before he reached the genteel, slightly run-down boarding-house on Madison Avenue where he resided permanently. He had spent the intervening time in covering his tracks, and for a man who had succeeded in doing so when five states were on the lookout for him in connection with an original and lucrative swindle, the maze of the city made the task mere child's play.

Experience had taught him the futility of theatric disguises when a simple change of scenery would do the trick in a far more subtle and effective manner, and the person who issued from the boarding-house as darkness fell was still attenuated and stoop-shouldered with his lugubrious face unadorned with hirsute camouflage. It was not the same person, however. This individual walked with a different step and bearing, his expression was entirely changed, and from top to toe he was dressed with an ultra elegance which bordered on the vulgar, although a second glance would have revealed the ravages of time and wear and the pathetic attempts to conceal them.

Out of sight of the boarding-house he purchased

a carnation for his buttonhole from a flower-seller, and, swinging his stick more jauntily, he straightened and strode off toward Broadway with the lithe trained step of the old-time actor he represented. He lost himself in the crowd to disentangle himself and merge with another moving group, and so proceeded downtown to the neighborhood of the Fresno once more. The block to the westward sported two hotels side by side on the south and a third one directly opposite them; and it was to the latter that George directed his steps, paying in advance for a third-floor front room, and incidentally casting his glance quickly down the page of the register.

There had been only a scant dozen arrivals during the day, no "Radwick," of course, and no writing which to his untrained but keen eye even remotely resembled that signature at the other hotel. Should he reconnoiter a little or go to his room, order some food and start his problematic vigil?

He decided on the former, despite its risk, and strolled back to Broadway in an aimless fashion; within the next half-hour he had made a circuit of every block in the immediate vicinity. If Radwick were watching for him he was keeping under too close cover to be near enough to identify this changed personality.

Ordering a quick bite in an obscure, basement restaurant, George strolled about till nearly midnight, and then stopped at a news stand two blocks above the Fresno for a last edition before returning to his room.

The quarter he deposited on the narrow counter, before the youth, who stood in the little kiosk, rolled over the edge and down to the floor inside, and George bent forward to help look for it. His lean frame tensed suddenly and then he straightened.

“Never mind, my lad!” he remarked in a grandiose manner. “Here is a dime in case that quarter isn’t found. Good-night.”

Tucking his paper under his arm he strolled away, but once around the corner he quickened his steps, until he had gone completely around the block and halted in the doorway of a closed shop directly opposite the news stand again.

When he had bent forward to look for the coin his eyes had encountered a bag just beneath the edge of the counter; the identical bag, unless his vision had failed, he had seen through his peephole in the next room at the Fresno! It was by the sheerest accident he had spied it; Radwick could not have anticipated *that*, and in five minutes it would be midnight. Already the newsboy was stacking up his few remaining papers, preparatory to closing for the night, and he had only to wait. . . .

At that precise moment hurried footsteps sounded along the almost deserted sidewalk and a man came into view making for the kiosk. It was Radwick! His head moved from side to side as he glanced quickly about him, and George shrank further back into the shadows of the doorway; the other passed without seeing him and halted before the counter just

as the youth was putting up the shutters. The bag and a coin changed hands and then began a chase, the intricacies of which even George's wide experience had not prepared him for.

Subway and tube, elevated, taxi and surface car, all came into play during the next hour as the man with the bag crossed and recrossed on his trail, doubling back and striking off at a tangent; but always the down-at-heel actor hung on tenaciously behind.

It wound up at last at the Grand Central Station! Was Radwick going to Chicago after all? George's mute question was soon answered, however, for his quarry broke into a run at the gates beyond which the Albany local was just pulling out and he swung himself aboard the next-to-the-last car while his shadow made a spring for the platform of the final one.

Where was Radwick going? He must have been assured that he was free from espionage now. Who could be waiting in some up-state town for news of Richard Monckton and the long chase overseas?

George hurried through the car and peered cautiously into the next one. Radwick was seated three rows within on the aisle, and his follower heaved a sigh of relief as he turned to his own day-coach and took an aisle seat in the fourth row, blessing the warmth of the night which caused the two end doors to have been left open so that he had an unobstructed view of the back of Radwick's head.

He kept his eyes upon it steadily as the train halted

at one close-lying station after another, but it did not once turn around. Evidently Radwick was assured of his freedom, for he produced a newspaper and buried himself in its folds, and George was beginning to think they were in for a prolonged run when the train halted once more and the quarry sprang up and made for the door.

George had paid the conductor for an Albany ticket, to be prepared for any intermediate stop, and as he dropped from the moving train and hurried after Radwick he glanced up at the sign above the station entrance and his heart gave a sudden leap.

Pocantico Hills! Radwick was going to the country place of the murdered man, the father of the young broker whom he had trailed over Europe!

With a thousand questions thronging his brain George walked softly and watched his step, for the village lay wrapped in slumber and the slightest foot-fall echoed alarmingly in the silence. Up the street, around the base of a steep little hill, and off along a broad thoroughfare that merged into a winding highway, past clustered cottages and open fields to the lines of hedges and fences marking the boundaries of opulent estates, he trailed noiselessly after the figure ahead, who walked rapidly, with the assurance of one familiar with the way.

They came, at length, to a high stone wall thatched with a luxuriant vine, and continued along beside it for a quarter of a mile or more, past huge grilled gates, inhospitably closed, to a gap in the masonry

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partially protected by stout wiring, and here Radwick halted, skirmished about for a brief period and at length wriggled through and disappeared.

Without a moment's hesitation, George Roper followed and was creeping after him, in the direction of his vanishing footfalls on gravel, when a third figure stepped suddenly from behind a tall bush and the starlight glinted on the blue barrel of a most businesslike looking pistol.

"Hands up!" A voice ordered in a low but peremptory tone. "I want you!"

George chuckled to himself as he obeyed. The stick-up artist was Phil Howe!

CHAPTER XV

THE TRUTH ABOUT RADWICK

ON Saturday morning, when Phil awakened in the little commercial hotel in Pocantico Hills, he whistled softly as he dressed. You couldn't beat these French girls! They had style, even in a slinky cape, and a way with them that no American could begin to have, and that Lucie was pretty and spirited, too! The Lord only knew how she had stood this dead-alive place all through last summer, with nothing but a movie and an ice-cream parlor to offer diversion. Still, a girl like that would get attention paid to her in a desert, and there must be a lot of nifty chauffeurs and butlers, foreign ones too, employed at the big estates in the neighborhood.

Phil's impressionable fancy had been caught by that momentary streak of light from his electric torch, and he concluded that after all it wouldn't do to return to the office of The Shadows with an incomplete report. Cliff had told him to get in with the servants and find out all he could about the old guy and his friends, and had himself suggested making the acquaintance of some pretty maid in the staff. He was only obeying instructions to the letter!

Pleasantly thrilled by his own virtue, Phil descended

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to the dining-room and had partially demolished a generous order of bacon and eggs when the traveling man who had scraped acquaintance on the porch the previous afternoon joined him at the end of the long table, and asked if he had been shooting pool the night before.

"No, I took a walk," Phil replied. "Is pool the chief dissipation around here? I noticed a movie house and a couple of ice-cream dens—"

"I guess the best thing in the burg is the 'phone to New York!" the traveling man laughed. "It gets the girls, anyway. There was a mob of them waiting for turns at the booth in the drugstore last night, and some of them were lookers, believe me! They weren't village belles, either, nor society dames, but there was one little queen—looked as if she might have been a governess, but oh, boy! what eyes, and how she could use 'em! Black as sloes, they were, with a laugh in 'em, and a little, pointed chin, and a mouth like a red dab!"

"Yeah?" Phil slowly lowered his fork. "Did she have on a white dress with a long, dark cape—?"

"Dark gray, the cape was, almost black, and a little gray hat with a bright red feather!" the other supplemented eagerly. "She talked like a foreigner, with a soft, purring little accent—that's what made me think she might be a governess, for you could see she wasn't—well, not a swell. Where did you meet her? Say, brother, if you can fix up a little party for to-night I'll hire a car—?"

He paused hopefully, but Phil grinned and shook his head.

"Sorry, but I didn't meet her; don't even know who she is. I just passed her walking along the road last night with a fellow."

"She must have had him waiting around outside somewhere, then, while she 'phoned to another guy! You can't beat 'em, even if you stack the cards, can you? I was right in the next booth and heard her call up 609— What's the matter?"

Phil was staring until his eyes protruded.

"609—what?" he demanded. "That's funny! What was the last number?"

"Didn't get it, or the exchange either." The traveling man shook his head as he pushed aside his empty oatmeal saucer. "You could tell from her tone that she was talking to a john, though. They sure can put it over, can't they? Did you think you knew that number?"

"Sounded kind of like one I've got down in a notebook," Phil replied. "It couldn't be the same, though. Going to be here long?"

He finished his breakfast and made his escape as soon as he could. That *was* funny, about the first three figures of that number Lucie had called in New York the night before. There wasn't any doubt of the girl's identity, for now that he had been reminded of it Phil did remember that spiky red quill in her smart little tam. Why in the world had Lucie gone all the way to the village to telephone when the one

at the house must be available for the servant's use? Obviously she didn't so that her conversation would not be overheard by any others of the household. That couldn't be of importance to the investigation, though, and the matter of that number was just a coincidence.

Armed that afternoon with a large, flamboyantly-ribboned box and a bottle of perfume with a foreign label, Phil approached the gap in the stone fence at the Manor once more. The gates were still closed and no one was visible through their grill, but the intermittent beat and whirr of an engine from the direction of the garage showed that one of the cars was being tuned up, and, more distant, there was the buzzing drone of a lawn mower.

With one free arm he lifted a strand of the wire barrier and, bending, crawled through and dropped behind the heap of loose fence stones, to take stock of his surroundings. Generations of landscape gardening had brought the grounds to the highest perfection of studied nature, a wilderness of great trees and massed shrubbery and lovely, unexpected vistas cunningly planned, but its beauty was lost on the unappreciative Phil.

Why didn't people have straight roads, and paths that a guy could follow in the dark if he had to, and clear away those old trees and bushes so they could see all around? He couldn't be three hundred yards from the house and yet there wasn't a sign of it, and how was he to find Lucie? Maybe she hadn't meant

to meet him but had just been kidding; maybe she'd given him up and gone. . . ?

Then all at once it was borne in upon him that water was trickling somewhere near with a little splash as though it were falling over stones, and it seemed as though a tune ran along with it, like some one humming in a low, soft contralto . . . He rose cautiously and looked to the left, farther along than the gap in the fence through which he had entered.

A clump of dogwood trees and thicket, flowering shrubbery rose in a slight depression of ground, and through the meandering line of bushes that wound from it toward the house he caught glimpses of a path. Keeping parallel with the boundary he wormed his way in that direction, taking advantage of the screening undergrowth he had derided a moment before, and when he reached the clump he forced the shrubbery apart and peered through the interlacing branches. A tiny stream rippled down the incline and cascaded over a miniature waterfall into a stone grotto that formed a quiet pool, and on a lichen-clothed ledge beside it Lucie sat sewing and humming a gay little tune to herself.

She was prettier even than he had thought, with her small dark head bent over the foaming white needlework and her red lips slightly parted as she sang. Phil drew a deep breath and stepped forward.

"Good-afternoon!" This time his debonair bow was not wasted in darkness. "I hardly hoped you'd be around, but I took a chance. I'm afraid you won't

like these but they're the best I could find in the village."

He laid his offerings before her and she reached out for them with a little cry of delight, the lace slipping from her knees to the ground.

"Oh, how lovelee—Philip!" she exclaimed. "Me, I did not think to see you, one so often forgets next day the promises of the moment, but now you shall sit here and have some of your own so delicious chocolates!"

"I'd rather smoke—and look at you!" Phil seated himself on the soft, mossy turf with his back against a dogwood tree. "You're mighty easy to look at, Lucie; did anybody ever tell you that before?"

She paused, laughing, with a plump caramel half way to her lips.

"But you are droll! Smoke your cigarette, and I shall keep these all to myself!—Unless you wish that I shall call your cousin Nora and share them with her?"

There was a malicious little sparkle in the dark eyes and Phil demanded:

"Have you been talking to her about me?"

"It takes two to talk, M'sieu. I spoke of you, but Nora finds she has forgotten you; she cannot recall that you exist and it is odd, for she has a long memory! Mon Dieu, it goes back nearly seventy years!"

"Holy Cat!" he groaned. "How was I to know how old she was!"

"The same way you knew her name, M'sieu—and

mine." Demurely Lucie slipped the candy into her small mouth and regarded him with polite inquiry.

"I'm caught!" he acknowledged laughingly, but his dismay was not all assumed. How the devil was he to get out of this? Then a quick inspiration came to him. "I guess I'd better come clean! I would have told you last night only I didn't want to scare you, but—I followed you from the drugstore!"

"You—followed me?" The mischief was gone from her eyes and she stared stonily. She wasn't offended, a girl who would pick a fellow up the way she had? What was the matter with her? She wasn't scared? "But how did you know our names, mine and Nora's?"

Lord, he hadn't thought of that!

"I asked!" he asserted glibly. "There was a man standing at the counter beside me dressed in chauffeur's livery, and when he saw me watching you go out he told me your name and that you were a maid here at the Manor. I asked if you were the housemaid, for right there I made up my mind I was going to meet you if I could, and he said no, that the housemaid at Monckton's was Nora Delany. I thought Nora'd be young, too, so I was safe in telling you I was a cousin of hers, and I never believed you'd be mean enough to ask her about me!"

He contrived an injuredly reproachful tone but Lucie did not smile.

"You followed me, yet you were here when I returned. You came from the direction of the house

and said that the dogs were to be turned loose on you!" she accused. Her voice wasn't soft and purring any more.

"Hadn't I found out where you worked, and didn't the fellow tell me it was the only place around with a high stone wall with vines all over it? When I'd followed along behind far enough to be sure you were going straight home, I cut around the next turning and came across the grounds from the other side. That's how the dogs heard me and commenced to howl. Gee, didn't I take a chance of getting bit merely to see you again?"

"What were you doing with the flashlight?" There was relenting in her tone and a suspicion of a dimple in her cheek, but she was still unconvinced.

"I always carry one in the country," Phil explained speciously. "You know I'm staying for a few days down at the hotel, looking for a likely spot along the roads around here for a garage."

"You were thinking, then, to put up a garage near Monsieu' Monckton's house in the city yesterday afternoon?" Her head was tilted slightly.

For a minute Phil looked blank, then he laughed.

"Oh, because I told you I'd been there looking for Nora? Say, the fellow in the drugstore told me this place belonged to the old millionaire who was just murdered and of course I'd read all about it in the papers. There was even a picture of the Manor in one of 'em and that's how I found it so easy. If you hadn't been so nice and friendly when I came on

you I was going to get in with the chauffeur here and meet you that way. Listen, I was in earnest; I don't often act crazy like this, but I sure fell hard when I saw you, Lucie! You oughtn't to blame me!"

She smiled and selected another chocolate daintily.

"That is the manner of you Americans. Always you—how do you say?—keed! It was very wrong of you, M'sieu Philip, and never would I have permitted you to talk to me but that I believed you were the cousin of Nora. I did not come here to-day to meet you, but because it will be *triste* at the house. They will bring home the body of poor Monsieu' Monckton for the funeral to-morrow."

"I read in the paper that he'd be shipped home this afternoon." Phil nodded, glad that the subject had been changed. "That man who used to come to see him—the one you told me about last night—do you think you would know him again if you should see him?"

"I should not like to see him!" Lucie sniffed at the bottle of perfume, wrinkling her small nose as though to eliminate some offensive odor. "He has a sharp, suspicious face like a ferret and eyes that bore through one! Not that they bore through *me*, for I only peep at him when he does not see! Why do you ask of him, M'sieu?"

"Oh, just curiosity!" Phil disclaimed hastily. "You believe the son killed the old man?"

She shrugged.

"What is one to think? That *bêtise* of a robber

—that is what we say camouflage. Would one do murder for an armful of old silver?"

"Maybe not, but 'one' would knock somebody flat to avoid being pinched for it," he remarked.

"What is that, 'pinch'?" she asked, frowning. "Is it *argot* of the thieves?"

"Just ordinary slang for getting arrested!" Phil turned a rich red. Then the thought of those numbers scrawled on the wall returned to his mind and he observed: "I thought you'd never get through telephoning last night! You must be mighty fond of him!"

"'Him?'" she repeated. "And how do you know that I telephone to a 'him,' M'sieu Philip?"

"What if I was just curious enough to get that call traced?" he asked teasingly, and then stared in surprise for the girl's eyes flashed sudden fire.

"You would not dare! But how could you? A pay-station, from that it is not possible to trace a call!"

"Say, don't get sore at me!" Phil pleaded. "I was only—teasing; of course I wouldn't try even if I could, but I'm jealous. You've sure got me going, Lucie, and when I open my own garage out here . . ."

He was thinking fast. So that was why she had walked all the way to the village instead of using the telephone at the Manor! It wasn't only that she didn't want to have that conversation overheard, but she meant to leave no record of the number! Was that the reason why she had looked so sort of scared

when he told her he had followed her from the drug-store?

The private affairs of a servant of the household could have nothing to do with the killing of its master, of course; but Cliff had told him to be on the lookout for anything suspicious, and this looked like something more than a mere flirtation of hers, if she went to such trouble to keep her communication secret. Phil decided that, for more than personal inclination, the young woman's further acquaintance might be worth cultivating, and suggested that he rent a car and take her for a drive that evening.

Lucie shook her head regretfully but decidedly.

"Not this evening, M'sieu Philip. Another time, perhaps, but to-night it will be expected that we all remain at home, because of Monsieu'."

That sounded reasonable enough, but there had been a little catch in her breath when she declined.

"Aw, you could slip out, the way you did last night!" Phil ventured. "After all, Mr. Monckton wasn't anything to you, and I may not be around here very long. I believe you've got another date!"

"I haven't!" Lucie retorted. "I cannot go, I should lose my place—!"

"Well, you'll lose it anyway, now the old man's gone and his son's in prison; there'll be no one to keep the house open," Phil argued. "If you don't come to-night I'll know it's because of somebody else, and I'm going to be here anyway, and wait—!"

"You shall not!" Lucie's voice trembled and, sweeping needlework and candy under her arm, she rose. "If you come near this house to-night I—I shall never see you, never again! I warn you, the dogs will be loose!"

There was room for no doubt now! Her anger was unfeigned, but beneath it Phil's sharp eyes read actual fear. What was going on to-night that she was afraid to have a stranger know?

"Then it *is* another date!" To test her he rose to histrionic heights and cried. "It's that fellow you 'phoned to last night at 609—"

"Stop!" The bottle of perfume fell crashing at her feet, sending up a wave of cloying fragrance on the still air, and her very lips went white. "You did trace that number, after all! I tell you, if you meddle in my affairs it shall be the worse for you! I do not know who you are nor why you have tried to talk to me, but I shall tell the gardener to watch for you, and hand you over to the police! Let me pass!"

With a rustle of her starched white skirt she was gone, and for a moment Phil stood staring almost stupidly after her. Then he made his way through the gap in the fence and back to the village, with one resolve firmly fixed in his mind; he would carry out his threat, and be on hand that evening. It might be a jealous lover she was expecting, but if it chanced after all to be some one in whom The Shadows might have a vital interest, he should not be allowed to slip through their fingers.

It was after nine when Phil approached the Manor once more and this time, in addition to his flashlight, he carried a small but serviceable pistol. The wind was rising now and the stars were obscured by a heavy cloud bank, but Phil smiled to himself at the deep silence which brooded over the vast estate.

If Lucie expected a visitor she would take good care that the dogs were not only securely tied but silenced, and avoiding that gap in the masonry he dropped over the wall by means of a low-hanging branch, as he had on the previous night. There were several dim lights in the garage and outbuildings, but only one in the house and that from the rear, under the roof. The room of one of the servants, probably; was Lucie waiting for the time of her tryst?

Taking up his stand behind a tree midway between the gate and the gap in the fence, where through a vista he commanded an unobstructed view of the garage lights faintly outlining the path leading to the house, Phil prepared himself for a protracted vigil, but it proved to be far longer than he could have anticipated. A distant church clock struck ten and eleven, and still no sound came to him but the whispering of the wind among the trees.

The garage lights and those in the other outbuildings went out one by one, and when midnight sounded the glow from the upper bedroom in the house was extinguished and utter darkness reigned.

Accustomed as he had been, in the pursuit of his previous vocation, to tirelessly vigilant waiting, Phil

found himself aching in every muscle and his eyelids growing heavy. That had been a fool notion about Lucie; she was probably asleep long ago. He didn't understand those hot-tempered foreign dames, and he must have been too darn suspicious, looking for clues where there weren't any. Still, he might as well wait a little longer, if he could only keep awake!

He moved about cautiously, but in the pitch darkness he kept running into trees and tripping over roots and rocks, and finally he returned to his sentinel tree and sat down, leaning against it. His head nodded lower and lower and at last rested on his chest, and he slept.

How long it was before he awakened Phil never knew, but he came to himself suddenly with every nerve tingling, and sprang to his feet, instinctively clutching his flashlight and pistol.

He had a vague notion that some one had passed him in the darkness, but that couldn't be, for somebody was coming now! Stealthy footsteps were creeping toward him, nearer and nearer from the direction of that break in the wall, and the cloud which had obscured the stars was gone. He shrank back in the shadow of a tall bush and when a gaunt figure loomed before him he stepped forward and ordered "Hands up!"

The figure promptly stretched long arms above his head, but his shoulders were shaking oddly, and all at once a disgustingly familiar voice spoke.

“Anything to oblige you, Phil, but we’re wasting time.”

“George!” The pistol was lowered and its owner demanded low but wrathfully: “What the hell are you doing here?”

As if in answer a half-stifled cry in a feminine voice came from the direction of the drive and George exclaimed:

“Same thing you are! Come on!”

They dashed forward, and around the turn in the driveway came upon a woman in a dark cape struggling in the grasp of a man. Phil flashed his light and at the same moment the woman wrenched herself from her captor’s hands and vanished among the trees, and George cried:

“Grab him, Phil! That’s my man! That’s Radwick!”

Phil obeyed and the stranger made no sign of protest. He seemed struck dumb by their advent, but when the flashlight revealed George’s stern features he broke out with an oath that ended in a subdued chuckle.

“The Reverend Doctor Griffith Rhodes again!” he gasped. “You two are dicks, are you? That’s a hot one! So am I!”

CHAPTER XVI

DOUBLE PLAY

“DON’T try to come that on me!” Phil Howe declared in a threatening tone. “You’re here to meet that woman, she ’phoned to you last night!”

“What woman?” Radwick stared from one to the other of them. “There’s a mix-up here, all right! You don’t mean the one I caught just now? Scranton Lucy?”

“‘Scranton’—!”

“Sure! She’s a common crook. Her husband was a member of the Dobson gang and got bumped off a year and a half—”

“Let’s get out of here!” George Roper interrupted. “There’s a light gone up over there and—golly, hear those dogs!”

A deep-throated baying arose upon the night and with one accord the three turned and started for the gap in the wall, George first and then Radwick, with Phil at his heels, grimly covering him with the pistol. They scrambled through the wires, crossed the road and, bending low, ran in the shadow of the opposite hedge till they came to a narrow, winding lane. Here with a simultaneous impulse they turned and dived

for the cover of some bushes growing by the side of the road.

For a good ten minutes they crouched, scarcely daring to breathe until the excited baying died down and finally ceased altogether. Then George remarked:

"It seems to me that explanations are in order all 'round, and this is as good a place to talk as we're likely to find at this hour. You're a pretty fast worker as a stick-up guy, Phil, but it looks as though you'd pulled a boner both times."

"I have, have I!" Phil exclaimed in high dudgeon. "Didn't you tell me to grab this fellow, and how do you know he's a dick? The whole thing may be a frame!"

"You heard the dope Lucian got yesterday about a certain crockery buyer named Christopher Radwick?" George asked meaningly, but his discretion was lost upon Phil.

"Holy Cat! The guy who chased Richard Monckton over Europe?" the latter cried. "Was that the job Cliff gave you—to find him?"

"Look here, boys. Suppose we get this straight," Radwick interrupted. "I can prove my identity all right, but you have the drop on me. If you will feel in the inside pocket of my coat you'll find my permit, credentials, and a foreign passport which they forgot to collect at a frontier abroad. So you're on the Monckton case? I thought so last night. Operatives for The Shadows, aren't you?"

"Take him up on that, George!" Phil commanded grimly, ignoring the question. "I've still got him covered."

George obeyed, and held the flashlight while he ran hastily through the papers.

"Wick's Detective Agency, eh?" he commented. "Radway Wicks, proprietor. You're Wicks himself! Our mistake, but we had to make sure. No wonder you stood aces high with that house dick at the 'Fresno,' but he overplayed the hand you left him!"

He returned the credentials and Phil sheepishly pocketed his pistol.

"Or else you went him one better," Wicks laughed. "I thought I put you to sleep rather neatly last night and I don't know how or when you got on my trail again, but it was good work! I'll take you on whenever you want a job."

"Thank you, Wicks," George replied with dignity. "My friend here and I are not operatives, but members of the firm ourselves—you guessed it, The Shadows. I have my police pass here, to the Monckton town house—"

"Don't bother—I'll take your word for it." Wicks waved the suggestion aside. "I only wish I'd known it last night, for we seem to have interfered with each other. I'm on a delicate private mission that has nothing to do with the murder you're investigating; I can't go any farther than that, boys, but I wish you all the luck in the world."

He rose and Phil asked suddenly:

“Will you answer one question? I’m asking because maybe your game has something to do with ours, after all, and we may be able to swop a little dope. Are you after that woman you call ‘Scranton Lucy’?”

“Lord, no! I haven’t seen her in a couple of years and I don’t know what she was doing in the grounds of the Manor, but she wore no hat and it looks as though she were working there. I had it on pretty good authority that she quit the game and ran straight, after her husband was killed, but you never can tell about these crooks. I’ll tell you anything you want to know about that dame!”

“What was her line when she stood in with the gang?”

“Inside stuff. Lucy was a manicurist in a hotel in Scranton when she got stuck on a good-looking guy who stopped there for a while and threw his coin around like a Prince. A theatrical company was there at the same time with a star more famous for her jewels than her acting. They played Scranton two nights and on the second this million-dollar kid—he called himself ‘Regner’—disappeared; so did the star’s sparklers and—Lucy. That was about four years ago, and for the next two she helped to make things hum. She learned hairdressing, picked up a few French phrases and an accent and her lay was to take a job as lady’s maid with some rich woman, get a line on her jewels and how and when they could be got at, and then leave.

“Days, sometimes weeks, would pass before any-

thing was pulled off and then she'd have an alibi that couldn't be shaken; but the bulls were watching when she went to work for Almadora, the opera singer. They watched after she left, and they caught Regner turning the trick. He tried to run for it, then lost his head and fired, and they shot him full of holes. You've heard of the Dobson gang he worked with?"

"Top-notchers—international jewel thieves!" Phil's tone was one of awed respect. "Biggest in the game, weren't they?"

"They were, but not any more!" Wicks laughed shortly. "I helped break 'em up when they tackled a client of mine, and the ring-leaders are up the river or dead. None of 'em left but a few of the rough workers, and they don't hang together or go after any big stuff. Lucy got out from under in time, but if there had been any ladies in Monckton's family who were kind of careless with their jewelry, I'd say she was up to her old tricks again." Wicks laughed once more, dismissing the subject. "I guess the coast is clear now and I'll beat it; drop in at the agency any time you want a little help and I'll be glad to see you."

"Fair enough! Same with us, but if you don't see us any quicker than you saw Lucy last summer, you wouldn't be much help!" Phil commented, adding suddenly: "Say, she knows you, don't she?"

"Not to my knowledge. When I broke up that gang she'd already quit them." Wicks eyed him curiously. "What do you mean about last summer? She

wasn't working the steamers or pulling off jobs on the other side, was she?"

"Nothing like that. She was right here at the Manor the three times you called, but I guess you had other fish to fry," Phil explained blandly. "She saw you, but didn't know who you were. It looks as though you had the right dope; she must be running straight, to stay on the job in a place like that where there was nothing doing in her line, for more than a year."

"Why did you grab her if you didn't want her?" George asked, quick to grasp the mental reservation hinted at in his confrere's tone.

"Running into her like that and recognizing her, I thought I'd get a little explanation of what she was doing there after two in the morning." Wicks shook his head. "It does look suspicious, but that's not my pigeon."

"I can explain that, myself!" Phil lighted a cigarette and flipped the match out into the road. "She slipped out to meet a sweetheart and was trying to get in late when she bumped into you. Wonder whether she's beat it for fear you'll hand her record to the housekeeper?"

"You said she didn't know who I was, and nothing was ever proved on her," Wicks responded. "Before her husband got killed she'd left him; there were a dozen reliable characters, neighbors, ready to swear to that. If you're still interested in her I guess you'll find that she's asleep, or pretending to be, in her room

at the Manor. Don't forget to look in on me, boys; glad to meet new members of the same club."

George returned the polite invitation and the other left them and swung off down the road in the direction of the village. For a little time there was silence between the two by the roadside, as Phil smoked reflectively and George ruminated on the unexpected turn of events.

Then the latter spoke.

"What was Wicks doing at the Manor last year? He didn't deny having been there."

"Too clever to deny it, he knew we'd find that out if we hadn't already," Phil replied. "He came to see the old man."

"Not Monckton!"

"Sure. He had three conferences with him, and if Lucy told me the truth he must have been hired to protect the father from the son." He repeated what Lucy had told him and added: "When I sprung it on him it was just a wild guess on my part from a kind of a slim description she gave me, but she didn't recognize him, that's certain. George, I'm beginning to think that maybe old Cliff is right after all! Lucy put it over on me good and plenty about being a French girl and all that; but I found out by accident three figures of a 'phone call she made Friday night and I've been right on her trail ever since. Wait'll you hear!"

When he had finished, George Roper said:

"My son, you've something at last. I think Wicks took the logical view; she didn't recognize him, nor

see you to-night, so it's a safe bet she didn't make her getaway just now in order to start the hue and cry after her; she's gone back to her room, but in the morning early she'll invent some excuse to beat it, and then is when we'll have to be on the job. Mine is finished for I'm satisfied Wicks is who he declares he is; his photograph was on that foreign passport. Still, if Monckton hired him to trail Richard, why was he trying to sneak into the Manor like a thief himself? With the old man gone, his case is finished."

"Whatever his game is, he'll try it again, so you'd better stick around with me," Phil Howe advised. "There's nothing we can do to-night without rousing that house and declaring ourselves, but I'm going to hang about and be right on the spot with the first streak of dawn. If Lucy beats it I'll follow her, and if I don't show up to report to Cliff before you do, tell him everything I've told you."

"I will," George promised. "I ought to send word in now but I think I'd better keep on Wicks' trail and find out what he's up to; it won't be difficult to pick him up again if he tries to lay low, now that I know who he is. I've had more sleep than I needed in the last twenty-four hours, and I'll watch while you take a nap, if you like. Look what that confounded wire did to my frock coat!"

Phil attempted to sound him as to his own experience with Wicks, but George maintained a dignified and noncommittal reserve on that score and he finally gave it up and took his confrere's advice.

When he awoke the stars had disappeared and a faint pink streaked the east.

Together they crept down the turnpike once more and through the break in the wall. No one was stirring as they made their way cautiously around behind the garage and stable to a point where they could command a view of the back door of the house and the tradesmen's driveway which led to a gate far in the rear of the estate. A single dog gave voice but was soon quiet, and they settled themselves behind a screening honeysuckle arbor to await the day.

It came sooner than they had anticipated and with it signs of renewed life in the house where the late owner was lying in state. The back door opened and a stout woman and a young girl, evidently the kitchenmaid, could be seen moving about within. They were joined presently by a very old woman and then three men appeared.

"That must be Nora, the housemaid," Phil remarked softly. "Lucie told me she was nearly seventy."

"And there's Peter Downes the butler and Jim Ricks the old valet. I talked to them both at the town house on Friday," George supplemented. "I don't know who that third man is—the footman, probably. If Lucie's in the house I wonder why she doesn't appear?"

"Look out, George!" Phil warned suddenly. "There are three or four men coming out of that tenant cottage, the gardeners, I suppose, and here

comes the garage helper. If there's no sign of Lucie soon I'm going up to the house and ask for her."

But that step proved unnecessary, for in a few minutes more the girl appeared. She wore the gray cape and small hat with the red feather, and carried a trim black bag.

"You were right, she's making her getaway!" exclaimed Phil beneath his breath. "She's shaking hands with the butler—there, now she's coming! I'll let her get five minutes start and then trail her. Good-by, George, and good luck!"

The slim, graceful figure walked quickly past their hiding place, without a sidelong glance, and down to the rear gate, pausing to close it after her, and turned in the opposite direction from the road which led to the village. When she had disappeared Phil made his way also to the gate but in a roundabout fashion, dodging under every tree that offered protection from observation. There was a low pedestrian gate beside the taller one and he vaulted it, then stood staring down the lane in the direction Lucie had taken. It was long and straight and white, with the black walls of different estates lining it on both sides, and nowhere was the girl visible. Had she turned in at another gate to linger and see if she was pursued?

Phil paused uncertainly but as the moments passed and she did not reappear, his anxiety increased. What if she were to cross through a neighboring estate on either side and strike off along the main road? What if she had telephoned from the Manor to have a car

waiting to pick her up and take her heaven knows where?

At last in desperation he hurried forward, but when he reached the boundary of the Manor, and the high stone wall gave place to a thick hedge, the girl stepped suddenly through it and confronted him.

“Good morning, M’sieu’ Philip of The Shadows!” She burlesqued her own accent of the previous day. “We both leave this so charming spot, it appears; shall we not travel together?”

CHAPTER XVII

LUCY INTERVENES

PHIL HOWE gazed at the mocking red lips of the young woman standing before him in the country lane and he, too, smiled slowly, not a whit abashed that she had guessed the truth.

“So you were wise, after all?” he asked. “Sure, we’ll travel together—that is, if you’re going my way?”

“I thought M’sieu was coming mine!” she murmured demurely.

“What ever you say! Here, let me carry that for you.” He possessed himself of her bag, which she relinquished without a murmur, and continued in his irrepressible bantering tone: “You didn’t think I’d stay on after you’d gone, when I’d come from the city expressly to see you? My dear Lucy, I’d follow you to Scranton, if you’d say the word!”

She drew in her breath sharply, but for a moment was silent as they walked together toward the head of the lane. He glanced sidewise at her, but she had bowed her head, her dark lashes sweeping her cheek as she kept her eyes fastened upon the ground, and her profile told him nothing.

At last she sighed plaintively and the accent was gone from her voice when she spoke.

"I'm never going back to Scranton, only as far as New York, to find another place where I can hide and earn my living—till I'm recognized and have to move on again! Isn't it hard that people won't ever let you live things down?"

So she was trying the sob stuff on him! He'd had a flash of her temper the day before and he knew she would give him short shrift now if she had nothing to conceal. On the other hand, he had everything to learn if he pretended to fall in with her game and could catch her off her guard.

"Is that what you're doing? Why do you stick to the same line, then, that you pulled when you were working in with the Dobson gang? I should think a manicuring table in a hotel or barber shop would suit you better, more like old times; it stands to reason the bulls are going to pull the records on you whenever they spot you in a new lay."

Lucy Regner bit her lip but her tone was almost saintly in its gentle resignation as she replied:

"No, I'm more used now to pretty surroundings and quiet, and the work of a parlormaid isn't hard. I've been very happy this past year, and if only poor Mr. Monckton hadn't been killed and you hadn't come to try to drag me into it—! But I suppose I must go on paying and I shouldn't complain!"

"What makes you say I came to drag you into it, or give you away?" Phil Howe asked with a beguiling note of sympathy. "I didn't act like it, did I? I could have gone straight to Mrs. Miller or the old

man's lawyers, but as it is you've left of your own accord and a reference from there after holding your position so long ought to be worth having."

"You didn't snitch on me because you wanted to get something out of me!" she accused, with a return of her natural manner.

"Sure I did!" he responded in perfect good humor. "I wanted a line on the other servants and I thought you'd be reasonable and give it to me. We're going to New York, you tell me? Are we walking there, or is there a station somewhere down the line?"

They had come to the end of the lane, where it turned into the broad road running parallel with the turnpike, and Lucy pointed.

"There's something better—a garage. We can hire a car to take us to the next station on the line. Oh, think of the reporters and police detectives there'll be on the trains because of the funeral to-day! If we could only—!"

She paused, and Phil understood. Well, why not? It would mean a prolonged tête-à-tête, but if he could convince her that he believed she was running straight she might let something slip.

"Say, why not motor in all the way to the city? We ought to be able to make it in a couple of hours with any kind of a car and I asked you to go for a ride with me, didn't I?" he urged. "How far is this garage?"

"Only just around that turn ahead. That's what I meant to do if I was alone, but maybe they won't

have a car," Lucy spoke uncertainly and then flashed him a sad little smile. "Where is our ride to end, Philip? At headquarters?"

"Aw, you know better than that!" Phil exclaimed reproachfully. "Anywhere you want to go, of course, and if they haven't a car they can tell us where we can get one."

But when they came to the small garage and service station a dingy and rather ramshackle sedan was available, and the mechanic lounging about volunteered to take them to the city for a flat rate of twenty-five dollars.

"An open car would have been nicer—?" Lucy began doubtfully.

"Still, if this bus can travel, it'll be better than the train," suggested Phil. "Where are we going?"

"To 140 New Golder's Green Road," she answered. "It's a little street in the Bronx only lately cut through, but if this boy don't know how to find it—?"

"I know it, all right," the mechanic volunteered. "My sister lives near."

The arrangement was concluded and they started along the road, the roar of the motor settling into a steady, high-pitched, singing hum that made Phil narrow his eyes. The car was evidently assembled of many heterogeneous parts, but if he knew its voice, that was a Duplez Special motor and high-g geared, at that. What was it doing with a soap-box flivver body and tin wheels?

Lucy wrinkled her nose at the stale, musty odor

within and he lowered the windows and then turned to her.

"That's better, eh? Tell me, Lucy, is it on the level? Have you cut out the old game?"

"It wouldn't be any use to try to convince you." She shrugged. "If you know as much as you seem to, you'll remember that the ladies I worked for as maids were all very fond of entertaining and dress—and jewels. Is it likely that I would have stayed for more than a year in the household of only one old gentleman?"

"Well, it isn't up to your former speed," he admitted. "Still, it's funny how burglaries always follow in your wake, isn't it? Even now!"

"But not murder!" Lucy twisted her hands together and the horror in her voice was unfeigned. "There was never any rough stuff—!"

She halted, but Phil Howe nodded quickly.

"I know; not until the time Regner was bumped off, and he started it then."

"It was the end for me!" she cried in sudden passion. "I only—did what I did because of him, and nothing could ever be fastened on me; he saw to that! You can't frame me for what I'm saying now! It's all over, and nobody can connect me with this awful thing!"

"I don't want to, but how about the guy, the one who grabbed you in the grounds last night? Did you recognize him? It was pretty dark."

"Not till he spoke, but the stars were out and it was

bright enough for me to see his face. I couldn't mistake that, it was the man I told you about; the one who came three times in the early summer to see Mr. Monckton."

"Sure, it was!" Phil relaxed a trifle, grinning. "It's lucky for you he didn't happen to spot you last year, for he knew you all right!"

"Is he one of The Shadows, too?" Lucy turned wide eyes upon him and he shook his head.

"Nope; he isn't a bull, either."

"Of course not, or Mr. Monckton would never have talked to him about his son. It's all true, what I told you! He did say that his death would some day be laid at his son's door!"

"And why were you listening, if you hadn't some little game of your own to play?" Phil demanded.

"I told you—I was curious." She glanced for a moment out of the window at the hedgerows flying past. "His visits seemed to have such a queer, bad effect on the old gentleman. He knew what was coming to him, some time or other, and that frame-up of a burglary didn't even take in the bulls. Oh, it is wicked to try to connect me with it! His son did it, he must have, and how could I know anything about it just because I—because there's an unproven record against me?"

"How could you?" Phil Howe echoed, with no trace of sarcasm. "Even if his son didn't do it, there's nothing to show that the burglar was enough of a top-notch to travel with what's left of the Dobson

gang, or that you've had anything to do with them for two years or so."

"Yet you came after me, you trailed me from Friday on, you knew when I telephoned to Mrs. Wilson from the drugstore, you had her number!"

"'Mrs. Wilson'?"

"Oh, you know very well!" Lucy made an impatient little movement of her hands. "Bronx, 6093. She's the friend I'm going to now, at New Golder's Green Road. I've known her since just before I went to work at the Manor. She's a dressmaker, a decent, fine woman and she doesn't know anything about me except that I'm a widow and have had a lot of trouble."

"You went to the bother of going to the village to 'phone her instead of just calling her from the Manor; you've got to admit it looked kind of funny under the circumstances," Phil remarked, adding suddenly: "Say, have you noticed that this lad goes all around the outskirts of every village we pass instead of straight on through?— Listen, bo, what's the idea? Why the detours?"

He had stuck his head out of the window and the youth grinned back over his shoulder.

"I'll get you there just as quick, mister, make it up in the open country, but I got plenty summonses around here and they'd lay for me if I was only hittin' it ten miles an hour."

"Another case of giving a dog a bad name!" Lucy murmured. "I had to go to the drugstore Friday

night for some aspirin for a headache, and I thought I'd call up from there at the same time, because Mrs. Miller is always trying to listen in and it makes it uncomfortable to know there's somebody at your shoulder. I told Mrs. Wilson that I'd get down to see her to-day if I could."

Phil reflected. The traveling man had said he could tell by her voice that she was talking to a "john" but he might have been kidding. Still, there was the difference in the last figure of the number; it wasn't what was written on the wall.

"You're sure you didn't call up 6099?" he asked.

Lucy stared at him and then burst into laughter, with an hysterical note in it that she must have been conscious of herself, for she choked it back swiftly.

"Of course I am! Didn't I get Mrs. Wilson herself?" she retorted, then sighed again. "When you came yesterday afternoon and I knew you'd been spying on me I thought you were going to take me down to headquarters and rake up all the past, and I'd be questioned and warned and all, over again! I've been trying so hard to forget, and after this last year I hoped I'd be left in peace!"

Their horn sounded twice as she stopped speaking and Phil glanced out, but nothing was ahead in the road and their pace had slackened. They were in the open country once more with wide meadows on one side stretching away to a distant orchard, and, on the other, the spreading golf course of a country club,

which flaunted its flag and gay awnings far on the top of a hill.

No one appeared on the links and he could make out the lines of but one single touring car drawn up before the club veranda.

"Pretty early in the season for that kind of joint to doll up on Sunday," Phil remarked, and turned again to his companion. "No one's going to bother you, Lucy—!"

He halted with his jaw dropped, for he was staring straight into the muzzle of a small pistol as business-like in appearance as the one he had flourished on the night before, and which now reposed ineffectually in his hip pocket. He made an instinctive reach toward it, however, but stopped at the cold menace of the woman's tone.

"None of that!" she cried sharply. "Stick 'em up, and keep 'em up! I'm going to make sure nobody bothers me, least of all a bum, amateur dick! Come on, Bert, I've got him covered, and if I have to shoot they'll think it's a punctured tire! Make it snappy!"

The youth, still grinning, had climbed down and opened the door, and in a flash he produced a gag and several short lengths of trolley wire.

"Get down on the floor, quick!" he ordered, while Phil glanced desperately down the deserted road and calculated his chances of being heard if he lifted his voice. Lucy had belonged to the Dobson gang and she'd stick at nothing, now that it was a question of being involved in murder! He knew the implacable

killer's look and it was in her eyes at this moment! He shrugged and dropped ignominiously to the floor of the car, while the young gunman expertly frisked, and then bound and gagged him.

"Car's coming!" Lucy Regner warned suddenly in a low, tense tone. "Look at your rear wheel, Bert, I'll keep him down below the window!"

The sound of an approaching car was indeed borne nearer and nearer to them as "Bert" closed the door and bent leisurely over the wheel, but that threatening gun was pressing against Phil's ear now, and he was helpless, anyway, with that confounded gag tearing his mouth apart and the wires cutting into his wrists and ankles.

He uttered a strangled oath that was some relief to his feelings as the other car passed and its humming was lost in the distance.

Lucy laughed again.

"Don't waste any time when you get loose trying to locate my friend Mrs. Wilson!" she advised jeeringly. "There isn't any Golder's Green nearer than London!—Roll him out, Bert, and over the ditch through that opening in the hedge. There'll be a golfer or two around in the afternoon to find him, or a course-keeper to-morrow. By-by, Philip, don't pick up strange girls in future!"

Her jibe was lost as he was dragged from the car and bumped into the ditch, from which a hard boot prodded him through the hedge and rolled him to the shade of a tree near a bench on the green. He was

lying on his face in the new, tender grass but he heard the slam of the car door and the woman's triumphant laughter above the roar of the motor as it sped off down the road.

With a violent wrench Phil turned himself over and heaved his body to a sitting posture, straining his eyes wildly for a sign of life about him; but the links were as deserted as the road, upon which a little cloud of dust was slowly settling, and there was no human habitation in sight on the other side of the road, while the club house was too far away for a cry or gesture to have attracted attention even had he been able to make one. The gag was an increasing torture and the slightest movement made the wires that bound him grind deeper into his flesh.

But greater than his physical suffering was the humiliation of his predicament. To think that he, one of the slickest yeggs in the country, had been kidnaped by two cheap crooks in broad daylight, trussed up and thrown here to wait until the problematical coming of some one to liberate him! Still, Scranton Lucy had been a full-fledged member of the redoubtable Dobson gang, she wasn't exactly a tyro; there was some salve to his injured vanity in that, and if he were a "bum amateur detective" as she had called him, he'd show her up yet! The very fact that she had been at such pains to rid herself of him proved her complicity, if not in the actual murder, then in something almost as bad that was going on, and he'd get her before he was through.

But how easily he had been trapped! Phil mentally writhed at the thought. He had asked for what was handed to him, begged for it! If the other Shadows were ever to know of this!

How had she got word to her buddy, the young gangster with the camouflaged car, and planted him so conveniently to steer Phil to! What had "Bert" done with the garage man? Sent him off down the road somewhere on a towing job, probably, and offered to take charge till he could get back. She was a good actress, that Scranton Lucy; her hesitation about the closed car and the story of her troubles, told to keep him from following the roads too attentively, had been well put over, considering that he ought to have been leery, knowing what she was!

A muffled groan forced its way through the gag. Would nobody ever come along? The sun wasn't even nearly overhead yet; it couldn't be more than ten o'clock for they'd started pretty early. Phil remembered how narrow and rutted the road had been, with no other car upon it since they had left the last village, except the one which passed while he lay helpless; it was no doubt a back way rarely used and there was no telling when any one else would travel by, especially on a Sunday when the cars all flocked to the main turnpike.

He'd never seen a golf course before without some cuckoo old guys chasing a ball around on it, but as he remarked to Lucy just before she stuck him up, it was early in the season, and it would be like the way his

luck seemed to be running now if he died there of starvation!

The pangs of hunger were gnawing at him, making him light-headed. Phil recalled that he'd had nothing to eat that day, not a morsel of food since the sloppy dinner at the hotel the night before; he'd give something for a cup of that weak, greasy-looking coffee right now! His throat was dry and swelling and his wrists and ankles felt as though those wires were red hot, searing into them! If only—!

All at once his heart missed a beat and then started racing again, for a little white sphere had come bounding over the top of a bunker and a young masculine voice reached him, a rather unpleasant voice, cultured but with a nasty, jibing note in it. However, no music could have been sweeter to Phil's ears and heedless of the anguish it caused him he flung himself flat and started rolling violently toward it.

Two masculine figures loomed into view, with a smaller laden one in tow, and all three halted for a moment in stupefaction, then rushed down upon him.

"What's up? Some tramp having a fit?" The young voice queried. "Don't touch him! Let the caddie run back—"

"No! Stay here, boy. Can't you see, Norcross, that the fellow's bound and gagged? Here, my man, just a minute and we'll have you loose. . . ."

The older, drawling tones trailed off into silence and it was as well for the speaker as for Phil himself

that the latter was gagged, for the face bending over him was that of Lucian Baynes!

The jewel expert of The Shadows recognized him at the same moment and unobserved by the strange young man in foppishly correct golf attire and the staring caddie, an instantaneous message flashed from eye to eye of the two colleagues.

The wire was untwisted from his wrists and the gag snatched from his mouth and Phil sat up weakly, trying to force a grin of reassurance to his distorted lips, but bright spots danced before his eyes and the blood surging suddenly through his arms brought sharp stabs of agony. Then a vacuum flask was presented to his mouth and ice-cold coffee trickled in a delicious stream down his parched throat, and in a moment speech came.

"Thanks—awfully. Friends of mine." It was a mere croaking whisper with unexpected rasps in it, but he managed to convey to Lucian Baynes that he understood and there was to be no recognition. "Practical joke, carried too far, that's all."

Lucian was at work upon his ankles now, but the young man stood superciliously by and the caddie still stared open-mouthed.

"You mean you don't want the police notified?" the young man asked incredulously. "This looks rather odd to me, Ballantyne; we'd better not have anything to do with it. He doesn't appear to need any further assistance and the sooner he's off the grounds the better."

Phil had risen weakly and now he stood rubbing his wrists and wondering how he could manage a word in private with Lucian Baynes. The name "Ballantyne" had illuminated the situation for him as far as his colleague was concerned; Lucian, under the guise he had formerly assumed to the prosperous traveling public, was evidently doing society for further data on their client, and he had called the young snob with him "Norcross."

He must be the Chester Norcross whom Richard Monckton had publicly thrashed, the brother of the girl to whom he had been engaged, and a good job, too, Phil concluded, glowering at him; but how was he to get Lucian aside? The jewel expert solved that problem for him.

"Your friends probably took your money from you, too, didn't they?" he asked, and at Phil's nod he added: "Here, I'll stake you to your ticket back to New York, if that's where you want to go, and show you the way to the station. Come along if you think you're able to make it now."

Heedless of young Norcross' further expostulations, he led the way to the opening in the hedge and pointed down the road, then took out his wallet.

"Go to the office as quick as you can!" he exclaimed in a hurried undertone. "No time for explanations now, but something's wrong there and Ethel's gone again! She has left The Shadows!"

CHAPTER XVIII

DESERTION UNDER FIRE

ETHEL JEPSON had spent the forenoon of Saturday in unaccustomed solitude, for not a single member of the firm had put in an appearance and there were no messages. She was in a fever of impatience and suspense, and when at last Cliff Nichols phoned she begged anxiously for news.

"Tell you later; nothing very much but we're on the right track." The buoyant note in his voice was unmistakable, however. "You know what I tried to get out of our client yesterday; I want you to go down and see him yourself this afternoon. Do you mind? It isn't a very pleasant place—"

"Mind?" Ethel caught him up. "I'm dying to go, Mr. Nichols! Will they let me in, though?"

"Yes, I've arranged for that; just give your name and take one of our cards with you," Cliff replied. "Find out, if you can, the reason why he doesn't like the housekeeper and where she might have been during the five years before she took that position, and also the exact state of affairs existing between our client and the lady who crossed on the same steamer with him. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. Shall I come straight back here, Mr. Nichols?" she asked eagerly. "I do so want to know

what's going on, and there hasn't been any word from a soul!"

"I didn't expect any!" Cliff laughed. "Yes, I'll meet you at the office about four."

Ethel felt no such squeamishness as her superior had done in entering the Tombs, but only a lively interest and curiosity, and she greeted Richard Monckton when he appeared with a matter-of-fact friendliness that robbed the situation of any embarrassment for him. Clifford Nichols had given her a free hand and she meant to make the most of it.

"Mr. Monckton, I suppose you think it's funny, my coming to you?" she began without preamble. "You see, I'm a little bit more than just office manager for our firm; I work right along with them on cases and they tell me everything."

"I was told that I might place every confidence in you, Miss Jepson; thank you for coming to me." Richard smiled faintly. "You have some news?"

"Well, I hadn't any instructions to tell you this, but we're really on the trail of that burglar. There isn't a doubt but we'll be able to prove very soon that he was there in your house Thursday night even if we can't pick him up right away, though we'll do that, too, later!"

She spoke with serene conviction and Richard's worn face lighted with heartfelt relief.

"Thank God!" he cried. "I can't tell you what that means to me! But it is certain? You are not saying this simply to reassure me?"

"It is the truth, Mr. Monckton!" Ethel asserted. "I don't think I'm at liberty to tell you any details, but we've traced that number he wrote on the wall, and now you'll just have to be patient, for it's a waiting game."

"I'll wait months, years, if it means a final clearing of my name!" exclaimed Richard. "I hadn't the slightest fear that I could be convicted of such a hideous thing but the thought of the trial was a living horror. I couldn't even be sure that *you* people believed me! Why should you when the police didn't, and every one else has deserted me—!"

He broke off, but the sudden bitterness in his tone was sharper than that of a man condemned alone by public opinion. Some one on whose faith he depended had failed him, and Ethel's sympathetic eyes saw the truth.

"Don't you believe every one's deserted you!" she declared warmly. "Maybe they're keeping away from here because they think you would want them to, but they've been to other places for you! I may be saying more than I should but I know you won't give me away, and *I* didn't make any promise not to tell you! What if somebody'd come to us, somebody who knew you weren't guilty, and wanted to help you any way she could without your knowing?"

Barbara Norcross had not come to help but to seek reassurance herself; Ethel was well aware of that, but she could not resist giving him that grain of mendacious comfort, and the truth had never been of the

least importance to her unless it happened to serve her ends.

She felt amply rewarded when their client took both her hands and wrung them heartily and said with a little quiver in his tones:

“Bless you, Miss Jepson! I know what you mean, but I couldn’t be sure! I hardly dared to hope! All the circumstances were against me and why should any one have believed in the face of such a damning chain of evidence!”

As though to conceal his emotion he reached in his pocket for the thin platinum case and took from it a cigarette, rolling it nervously between fingers that shook slightly, and Ethel announced:

“Everybody ought to have believed you if they’d had good common sense! I knew right from the start that there wasn’t any question of your having had anything to do with it, and Mr. Nichols never wasted a minute in a different direction than going straight after the man who killed your father, Mr. Monckton; but other things will come up that we’ve got to answer.”

“I appreciate that fact.” Richard spoke slowly, tapping with the cigarette on the case as he had done during the interview in The Showers’ office. “I’d like you to know, Miss Jepson, that I feel very grateful, more than satisfied with the way you have taken hold of the affair, and especially with the view which you yourself have taken. A woman’s intuition is seldom wrong and it encourages me to believe that others

may be brought to feel as you do. You've no idea how it bucks a fellow up!"

"Oh, well, I don't matter," Ethel remarked flatly. "I might be able to help, though, in the things that perhaps you think don't mean anything in the investigation because they don't bear directly on the murder. They count, anyway, and we don't want them sprung on us without a comeback. That Mrs. Miller, for instance. She was playing some sort of a game, we're wise to that, for she doesn't belong in any housekeeper's position, but she stuck it out a long while—ten years."

Richard glanced down thoughtfully at the cigarette as a few grains of tobacco spilled from its loosened end upon his hand, but he made no effort to light it and the guard by the door who had been watching unobtrusively for such a move, turned away. At length the client looked up again into his questioner's eyes.

"I told Mr. Nichols her history."

"But not all of it!" Ethel countered. "You said she disappeared for five years after her husband's death until she came to your father. She must have talked a little about those five years. It would be a natural enough question for anybody to ask her where she'd been, especially as she was supposed to be broke."

"I didn't ask her!" Richard disclaimed hastily. "I believe she told my father she had traveled almost constantly, and I've heard her speak of some place in the west—Laramie, if I remember rightly. She—she al-

ways seemed satisfied with her position as mistress of my father's house."

An inkling came to Ethel with his last words, and she said bluntly:

"She'd have been more satisfied to have it permanently, wouldn't she? She'd known what it was to be country poor, and then had a few years of society and high living in the city, only to have it swept away. She was still good-looking, and pushing, and scheming—"

"Ah, I wouldn't go so far as to say that!" Richard expostulated.

"I know you wouldn't; that's why I'm saying it for you!" Ethel retorted. "She knew your father was sympathetic about her troubles, and so she hung on year after year, making herself necessary to him, and counting on his being soft enough to marry her as he got older! You were in her way, and I'll bet she helped on the trouble between you and your father all she could!"

"I have no proof that Mrs. Miller had any designs on my father." Richard smiled again, deprecatingly. "It would be caddish of me to say so; my father would never have dreamed of taking such a step, and it is all over now. If he hasn't left her well provided for in view of her long service, I shall arrange it. I have never been aware of any open hostility on her part."

That was that! Ethel drew a deep breath. She had judged the young man in her shrewd little way

at his first coming to The Shadows and her belief in him was intensified now, as her impulsive sympathies were more strongly enlisted. He was crazy about that girl who didn't care enough to have faith in spite of everything; that was patent, but just what understanding, if any, existed between them when the steamer docked three days before? Cliff Nichols wanted to know and Ethel had no intention of failing him if she could help it, but it was going to be hard in the face of Richard Monckton's perfectly pleasant but aloof manner.

"Mr. Monckton, you told Mr. Nichols that you weren't engaged to be married, but somebody else seems to think you are, somebody that ought to know," she declared shamelessly. "Of course nothing's been announced and maybe you don't feel that it's any of our business, but it may be brought out if they actually held you for trial before we get the goods. Is it true that this other party misunderstood? That you were just—kidding?"

"She acknowledged it?" The cigarette dropped from his fingers and rolled upon the long table at the end of which he sat. "She stood by me even to—to that extent, in the face of everything? I thought of course that she would shrink from it now and I would never have tried to hold her—" Again he checked himself and a deep red flushed his cheeks. "Tell her not to come here, Miss Jepson! I will not see her again till I can come to her a free man with the stain of this horrible accusation wiped away forever! Tell

her—but I am not supposed to know that she has been to you! I can trust you to—to say the right thing, and you've given me a new lease of life! Will you come again?"

"If Mr. Nichols will let me." Ethel rose. "Just you remember that we're working for you every minute!"

"I'm certain of that." Richard shook hands once more with undisguised fervor. "I shall wait as patiently as I can."

Ethel left with her brain on fire. Their client must be cleared, and soon! He was one of the nicest boys she had ever seen and that girl wasn't half good enough for him, but if he wanted her he should have his chance! She burned with impatience to further his cause, and when she reached the office of The Shadows she found Cliff Nichols awaiting her and burst upon him like a small whirlwind.

"What did you find out at 840 West One Hundred and Tenth?" she demanded. "Did you find the family and talk to the little girl? Did she tell you the name of the man who was supposed to call her uncle up that Thursday night and didn't?"

"You mean have I got the murderer handcuffed in my study now?" Cliff shook his head at her. "Ethel, it isn't going to be as easy as that! I found out from the janitor that only two families have telephones in the house and there's a ten-year-old girl named 'Bessie' in one of them, on the third floor rear, but I haven't caught a glimpse of her. Our 'phone call last night

must have given them the alarm and they're keeping the child close. It wouldn't do any good to get into their apartment on some pretext; I'll have to watch and try to spot 'Uncle Charlie' and gain his confidence, and it's going to take time."

Ethel opened her lips to speak but evidently changed her mind. Her cheeks were flushed and her breath came fast, but when at length she spoke it was to say meekly:

"Is that all? That sounds like days and days when every minute counts, and suppose Uncle Charlie doesn't show up for weeks. What'll you do?"

Cliff Nichols shrugged.

"What can we do?" he asked. "That's the only clew we have and there is no other way to follow it. Did Monckton tell you anything?"

"He just let on without knowing it that a guess or two of mine was correct." Ethel told of their client's unconscious admission of the renewed engagement and of the housekeeper's long-deferred hopes which death had finally shattered.

When she had finished, Cliff nodded.

"I thought so, but I wanted to make sure. You needn't wait, Ethel; just leave a note for any of the boys who might drop in to meet me here to-morrow afternoon."

"You're going back uptown?" There was blank disappointment in her tone. "Isn't there anything maybe I could do here? If I could get in with the kid's mother in some way—?"

Cliff shook his head resolutely, ignoring the pleading in her tone.

“Not a chance, Ethel; it’s too risky! I’m not afraid you’d make any slip that would give us away, and with your remarkable luck and cleverness, my dear, you might be able to pick up some valuable clues, but there’s a killer with his own life to fight for, and his friends and accomplices will stick at nothing! We can’t afford to take a chance with your safety now! I’ll see you to-morrow afternoon, and meanwhile just try to forget all about it.”

Forget it? Ethel sat lost in deep and earnest reflection after Cliff had taken his departure. Forget it, even for a minute, with Richard Monckton’s worn, anguished face before her, his pathetically hopeful, brave voice still ringing in her ears? Let twenty-four more hours pass while he waited, and Cliff Nichols watched for a man who would be suspicious of overtures for many a long day to come? Could she close her ears and keep her twitching fingers from meddling with the case as she had with the others? She pursed her lips and a slow, unmistakable light dawned in her eyes.

The next morning when Lucian dropped into the office he found Rex Powell there before him. His face was very grave, almost stern, and he held two notes in his hand.

“Cliff here?” Lucian Baynes asked. “I haven’t succeeded in arranging an introduction to Miss Barbara Norcross but I’ve got the next best thing, al-

though it's highly distasteful! My old steamship acquaintance presented me to young Chester Norcross, her brother, at his club last night, and although he is an unmitigated swine I've accepted his invitation to play a round of golf with him this morning out at the Willowmere Club. I'll let him beat me with just enough trouble to make it interesting, and that ought to be good for an invitation to meet his sister. Have you been busy?"

"Very much so, but I've only succeeded in having general rumors corroborated and in discovering that our client's associates, and even his friends from university days, have unanimously taken the police view of the case." Rex held out one of the notes. "Ethel left this last evening, evidently under instructions from Cliff. He'll be here this afternoon and wants all of us to meet him if we can."

"Ethel left this last night?" Lucian read the slip and frowned. "Isn't she coming here to-day? That's odd; never could keep her out of things before when we had an investigation on!"

"Ethel will not be here," Rex Powell replied slowly, as he extended the second sheet of paper. It was not typed but carefully written though under some stress as the erasures showed. "I am afraid that this time we have really lost our secretary!"

There was a deep note of pain in his voice, but Lucian Baynes did not heed it as he stared at the words beneath his eyes.

DEAR SHADOWERS,

Hope you won't mind but I'm going away again for a little while. There doesn't seem to be any way I can help you now and you don't need me. Maybe you won't want me to come back but I will have to take a chance on that. Don't worry about me. I shall be quite all right and I hope you'll forgive me. Please don't go to Mrs. Gorham, I told her Mr. Powell was sending me away on business for him, but it's really my own. With best wishes for success and good luck,

ETHEL JEPSON.

"So she's had enough of us!" Lucian exclaimed. "That taste of society life has spoiled her for the work here and I can't blame her, but by Jove how we shall miss her!"

"You think it's that?" Rex asked. "You don't think that perhaps she didn't leave of her own accord? She wasn't coerced?"

"Only by her own desires, old man!" Lucian laid his hand affectionately on his chief's shoulder. "This hits all of us pretty hard but—remember that toy dog and the fresh corsage bouquets every day? Ethel's only a woman and when it's a question of her work or the man—well, what could you have expected? It isn't like her, somehow, but Ethel has deserted under fire!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE GIRL ON THE STAIRS

CLIFFORD NICHOLS, Rex Powell and Henry Corliss met at two, and the varying aspects of the investigation paled into insignificance before the fact of Ethel's disappearance.

Rex was still deeply troubled and Henry openly disconsolate, but Cliff himself accepted the news quietly with a silence that was almost defensive.

"Lucian thinks Ethel has a—a sentimental affair on her mind," Rex observed. "It is ridiculous, of course, but then he cites the Pekingese, which she admitted was a gift, and the flowers she wears. I can't believe it possible—that child!"

"You mean she thinks her young man would be disgusted if he found out what kind of work she was doing?" Henry Corliss shook his head dolefully. "That's not Ethel! Maybe she's hurt because Cliff hasn't let her get in on the investigation?"

Cliff Nichol's face was a study at this suggestion but he remarked noncommittally:

"Personally, I don't believe either of you is right, but I really feel we ought to find her, just to assure ourselves that she isn't doing anything foolish. I don't mean getting engaged, that is her own affair if she is contemplating it, but we can never tell what

she is going to do next. Rex, we don't need any more data on Monckton, and Talbot Gorham's widow, who is chaperoning Ethel, knows only that she is the private secretary of 'Mr. Powell.' You read this note first, and you see Ethel says she has told her she is going away on business for you. If under another name you could manage to meet Mrs. Gorham and some of the set Ethel is traveling with through her, we may find out where the child is; she might have dropped a hint to some one of them as to her plans. This has nothing to do with our work, of course, but it is still more important."

"It is," Rex Powell commented with a certain grimness. "She has asked us not to go to Mrs. Gorham; that is the one reason why I think it is through that lady we may unearth some clew to her disappearance, for it amounts to that. I—I couldn't work with any degree of concentration till I knew all was well with her."

"All right, then; cut along, Rex, and if you ring here and no one answers come yourself and leave a note." Cliff turned to Henry. "Did you go to Judge Francis and Dr. Kibbe and Waldron Ingram?"

"Yes. I went to the Judge first. He's a fine old white-haired fellow of the old school with a pretty keen mind and he got like a shot what I wanted, but when he summoned his valet, that Isaac, I knew I couldn't get any dope from him about the servants at the Manor. Isaac is as old as Noah, and his kinky hair's as white, too. He's been with the Judge for

nearly fifty years and all he could tell me was that the help employed at the Manor all 'treated him fine,' and it seemed like they were all the kind that 'quality folks' would want around them." Henry paused, clasping his hands about his rotund knees. "The next one I struck was Dr. Kibbe. His chauffeur, Paolo Galli, had the car just outside, and he's a smooth article. I got it from him finally that there is one maid in that household who is mighty attractive, and had 'phone calls and occasional visitors who would bear watching. It may be a case of sour grapes, but I got her name anyway—Lucie Regnier.

"Then I saw Ingram, the president of the Citizens and Aliens Bank. He wasn't so easy to handle; didn't want himself or his servants mixed up in the case, but when I showed him it was a choice of us or the police, he produced his valet. Hugh Brinsley. Nothing much doing, though—except that Brinsley got from de Puyster Monckton's own valet, old Jim Ricks, that Mr. Monckton was grieving himself to death about his son. For the love of Pete, Cliff, give me a new line! I'm no cross-examiner!"

"All right!" Cliff Nichols bent toward his stout confrere. "This is rather more in your line. The valet you just spoke of, Jim Ricks, had what was described to me as a 'sort of fit' late Friday afternoon at the house where the murder took place and was taken to the hospital; find out if he's able to talk and get all the little intimate details you can from him about the old gentleman's manner during the past

few months. He doesn't like Richard and he's almost fanatically loyal to the memory of the father, but you may get some information that you can look at in an unprejudiced way."

"'Unprejudiced!' Huh!" Henry snorted. "You make me just naturally tired, Cliff! Just because of that handwriting, you're still—Gosh A'mighty! Look at Phil!"

The youngest member of The Shadows sauntered in with a fair assumption of his old debonair manner, but it was slightly marred by the deep circles under his eyes and the drawn look of pain about his mouth.

"Hello, you two!" Phil Howe sank into a chair, pulling his cuffs down carefully over his wrists. "Where's Rex? I've been in touch with both George and Luce, and I got the order to report here as quick as I could. What happened to Ethel?"

"You've heard, then?" Cliff handed over her note. "We're going to trace her this time, but tell us what has happened to you? You look rather as though you'd been through the mill!"

"I'll say I have!" Phil's eyes twinkled. "I'm not the only one! I have a message for you from George about the man 'Radwick.' "

Starting with that unexpected meeting in the grounds of the Manor on the previous night, Phil told of Wick's disclosure as to his own identity and that of the maid, and Henry sat back with a grunt of half-incredulous belief.

"Lucy Regner! That's the woman Galli talked

about—said she'd be worth watching. I never ran into the Dobson gang, guess they didn't operate in the middle west. Where's the Regner woman now?"

Phil reddened.

"Well, I suppose if I don't tell you Lucian will!" He gave them an account of his morning's adventure and Henry chuckled with huge enjoyment, but Cliff remarked very seriously:

"You must find her again and don't lose her trail day or night! She called up a number beginning with 609—?"

"Yes, but when I taxed her with calling 6099 she laughed at me as if she was relieved; it would be a funny coincidence if she hadn't been asking for that number after all, wouldn't it?"

Cliff Nichols discreetly ignored the question but asked one in his turn.

"Have you any idea how you can pick her up again?"

"Yes, if she's still trailing with what's left of the old gang. I think I know where I can find one or two of them and I'll be in right, for they'll remember a few tricks I turned and accept me as one of them. You can bet I won't rest till I've evened the score with Lucy! Coming, Henry?"

The two had been gone more than an hour when George appeared, and he was closely followed by Lucian Baynes who listened attentively with Cliff to further details of the encounter with Radway Wicks.

"He isn't associated with Lucy, that's clear,"

George finished. "The meeting was a surprise to both of them, and though she remembered him as the man who called three times last summer, according to Phil, I don't think she knew who he was. Now, if he was employed by Monckton to watch his son, he certainly couldn't have been instrumental in bringing him to the verge of ruin, and why did he go sneaking up to the Manor as soon as he thought he had lost me?"

"I don't know." Cliff shook his head. "He's got a pretty big name and his agency is one of the best. He would have sent one of his operatives to shadow Richard unless there was more important work connected with it than that alone. Perhaps we can get him to tell us. Did he reappear to-day at the Manor?"

"No. A man answering his description took the early train from the Pocantico Hills station and when I reached the city I called him up at his office. He's there, all right, and I have an appointment to see him in an hour. If he tries to hedge I'll put it up to him straight. He couldn't afford to have the press get wind of that nocturnal visit of his." George Roper paused and added reflectively: "What do you suppose Lucy Regner's game was?"

"I don't think there can be any doubt about that." Cliff smiled slightly. "There were no women in the Monckton family with jewels that would have attracted Lucy's crowd, but many of the house guests last summer and this spring had a lot of valuables, and I know of three robberies in the last month alone.

Judge Abner Francis lost a rich collection of stick-pins; Dr. Kibbe, a set of studs and waistcoat buttons worth over five thousand, and Mrs. Waldron Ingram, a diamond necklace that has been famous for more than two generations. Lucy is still in the old game but playing it safe, for none of the thefts took place at the Manor but while the victims were traveling about. Phil is hot on the woman's trail now. I won't be here to-night, George, but leave a report here for me on your conference with Wicks."

George left them and Lucian Baynes rose also.

"I looked in because you wanted me to, old man, but there's nothing more of any importance. I have a new little playmate, about as perfect a young rotter as I've ever met. His name is Chester Norcross and I'm dining to-morrow night with him and his sister. Will I find you here to-morrow if anything turns up in the meantime?"

"I'm not sure," Cliff responded. "I'm off on a little investigation of my own and you couldn't reach me, for I don't know myself where I'm likely to be."

He had told none of his colleagues of the discovery of the right number, and now he locked the office and started uptown. He left the subway at the One Hundred and Tenth Street station and walked westward to Number 840, a modest, old fashioned brick building, set between two more pretentious modern ones, on a block that had evidently been given over to cheap flats in the days when bells and mail boxes for each tenant were installed in the vestibules.

Glancing at the row on the left, he saw two letters in the third box and took them out. One was addressed to Charles Curran and the other to Mrs. Lena Farley, and placing them in his pocket he pressed the bell numbered "four" in the opposite row.

The door clicked and he passed into the dim, narrow hallway and up one flight of the clean but shabbily carpeted stairs. A stout, smiling-faced Irish-woman stood waiting for him in the opened door of the front flat and said cordially:

"Good-afternoon to you, Mr. Nixon! Your room's ready for you and here's a key. I put your bag on the bed and a letter's come for you."

"Thanks, I'm sure I'll be very comfortable." Cliff took the letter which he had mailed to himself as corroborative evidence of his identity and passed into the small hallroom just by the door that he had engaged that morning. He turned the key in the lock behind him and took out the letters he had abstracted below. The one addressed to "Mrs. Farley" was in an illiterate feminine hand with a blot or two and a smear of dirt where the flap was sealed. He broke it open and read:

DEER LENA:

Bill and me will be arond Sundy eve. like you asked us. Has Charlie been sick? I seen him yesterdy and I thought he looked awful bad. Tell Bessie I'm bringing her a new dress I maid for the dol Joe give her. No more now.

Your loveing friend,

JEN.

244 *The Handwriting on the Wall*

Mrs. Farley would learn that evening that her letter had gone astray, Cliff reflected. Would that make her suspicious of espionage? The family in the third floor rear had already taken alarm at the telephone call innocently answered by the child, Bessie. Would they look askance at their neighbor's new lodger? It couldn't be helped, now, for he couldn't reseal the torn envelope, but he moistened the flap of the second letter and then carefully rolled it back with a pencil. He read in a labored masculine hand:

Hello, Charlie. Got your number o. k. but Al slipped me the word to lay off it. What's up? I got a hunch I know and if it's straight we'd both better hop a rattler for the sticks. Meet me late to-night at the old place and give me the dope.

LEFTY.

So the alarm had gone out. "Al" and "Lefty" must be two of the pals whom the little girl said were always calling her uncle. Cliff meant to get a look at "Bill" and "Jen" when they arrived, and to follow Charlie later if he went to keep that appointment.

He sealed the letter again and going downstairs dropped it into the box from which he had taken it, and then went to a little restaurant around the corner for a hasty bite of dinner. One significant fact had been gleamed from the first letter; Charlie "looked awful bad" the day before, so bad that his friend wondered if he had been ill. There would be small need to wonder, if he were worrying about the

telephone call and the fear of being drawn into trouble!

The letter from Lefty had been unmistakable. He was suspicious of the truth but not certain, and he was prepared to fly from the city. Clearly neither he, Bill, nor Al, had been the one for whose call Charlie had waited vainly on that fateful Thursday night. There was "Joe" too; surely among so many Cliff would be able to obtain a clew to the man who had written that number on the wall!

At a little after eight that evening he heard footsteps on the stairs and a woman's high-pitched, rather coarse laughter. He had left the entrance door of the apartment open an inch or two and now he went to it with his hat in his hand as though prepared to go out again.

The door at the opposite end of the hall opened, too, and he caught a glimpse of a thin, rather careworn looking woman of perhaps thirty with hollow, deeply circled eyes in a pale, gaunt face. Behind her, for an instant, a man appeared; he was younger, and in his shirt sleeves his shoulders loomed very broad. That was all Cliff could make out, for he stepped back quickly as a dumpy, plump little woman in a flaring, feathered hat mounted the stairs in company with a sallow-faced youth in a loud-checked suit and bright, squeaky, yellow shoes.

They were greeted by the thin, weary-eyed hostess and the door closed behind them, but not before Cliff

heard a pleased little cry in a childish voice—the same clear treble that had replied to him over the 'phone.

He watched but no one else came and a little past midnight the visiting couple departed, taking with them the broad-shouldered young man. Could this be indeed Charlie, and was he going to keep that appointment Lefty had made? The letter had been gone from the box when Cliff returned after dining, and now he tiptoed from the flat, closing the door noiselessly behind him, and followed the trio downstairs. He had provided himself with cheap, ready-made clothes, with the creases partially removed and dust rubbed into the cloth here and there, in keeping with the rôle of shipping clerk adopted for the benefit of his new landlady. The blue serge suit and rather dilapidated gray felt hat were inconspicuous enough to take away much of the distinction of his appearance; his mustache had been clipped, the goatee shaved ruthlessly away, and his hair cut short and plastered down. Looking like a down-at-heel, but eminently respectable white collar man of early middle age, he let himself quietly out and walked several yards behind his quarry to the corner.

Here they separated, the couple boarding a surface car, and the young man proceeding on across town. Cliff trailed him, keeping just behind his solitary figure on the other side of the street; he went straight down the steeply sloping hill at a swinging, unhurried pace, but at the bottom he turned and it seemed to Cliff that his gait grew uneven and his bearing furtive. Down one street and up another, sometimes completely

circling a block, he moved at a constantly increasing pace and it was borne in upon Cliff that he was suspicious of espionage if not actually sure of it, and was trying to throw a possible pursuer off the track.

For more than an hour he dodged about, sometimes looking hastily over his shoulder, but if he saw that slim figure loitering aimlessly in his wake he gave no sign of it, and at last turned into the side door of an apparently empty saloon. A light shone from it for an instant, however, and Cliff hesitated a moment and then opened the door himself and entered a small room fitted with little round tables, at several of which groups of men were seated drinking and talking together in orderly, low tones; their sharp faces—one or two with the prison pallor which Cliff recognized and many with the sallow skin and leaden, contracted eyes of the dope fiend—expressing no hilarity but rather stern business.

The broad-shouldered young man sat down alone, but he was almost instantly joined by a hard-featured man about five years his senior who greeted him with an anxious, questioning air and drew a chair up close.

Cliff took his place alone at a table near by, and the bartender eyed him warily but nodded with a grunt of reassurance when Cliff addressed him confidentially.

“I’m waiting here for Kelly. Know him, don’t you? Bring me a small beer and if he comes in the front way tell him Cliff’s here, will you?”

“I only know Black Kelly, and he’s been and gone,

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but maybe he'll come back again if he's got a date with you," the bartender answered. "Dark or light?"

"Light." Cliff settled back in his chair and tried to listen to the conversation going on at the next table, but only snatches of it reached his ears. Once the latest comer uttered a sharp, smothered ejaculation and brought his fist down on his knee, clenched convulsively. Then he swore under his breath and added:

"So I hit it! The damn fool, why did he chance it? I tell you, Charlie, it's a good thing they're on the wrong steer but we'd better make ourselves scarce for a while!"

"Not a chance, Lefty. You can beat it if you want to but I've got to stick around. My sister's kid . . ."

The rest was lost as Charlie lowered his tones cautiously. But at a further murmured remark Cliff was aware that the man called "Lefty" turned with elaborate casualness and stared at him shrewdly, and then there came one word of a phrase which caused Cliff himself to stiffen in his chair. That word was "Shadows!"

Lefty rose in a few minutes and went out abruptly, and Charlie was preparing to follow, as Cliff spilled part of the contents of his glass in the cuspidor beside him and sipped with fastidious repugnance at the remainder, when the bartender reëntered, followed by a stout, florid-faced man who hurried to Charlie's side and bent over him.

"Here that night . . . sure you were, you're all right, but he . . . Told me what he said to you . . ."

Yeah, all to pieces, and hitting the snow again . . . Not on your life, I couldn't take a chance . . . Sure I wouldn't go back on him but I shipped him out to the old woman's . . . hell of a break, if he don't pull himself together—!"

Charlie replied in an indistinguishable undertone and clapping the florid man on his stout shoulder he went out, while Cliff finished his beer, paid the bartender, leaving a message for the fictitious "Kelly," and followed. Charlie could not, after all, have been aware of his interest, for he went straight across town to the apartment house again without once looking back.

Cliff loitered in the vestibule for a good ten minutes, then softly opened the door with his key. He had started up the stairs when the sight of a figure crouched just below the topmost step made him pause.

It was that of a woman, evidently youthful from her petite slenderness and dressed in a straight gown of some dark, soft material that made no slightest rustle as she sprang up and started forward after one startled look at him, but Cliff had leaped forward and caught her by the arm.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed in a low but stern tone. "I might have known you'd try something like this, Ethel! What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER XX

BESSIE

“**I**—I’VE got a room on the next floor with Mrs. Franck,” Ethel explained in a whisper, as she hung her head. “I know you said you wouldn’t let me help you here, Mr. Nichols, but that was only because you were afraid maybe I couldn’t take care of myself and they might hurt me. I just couldn’t help disobeying you, and you’d told me to pretend to leave, yourself. Oh, please don’t send me away! I know I can help you in the one way you couldn’t even try. Please!”

Her earnestness was compelling and Cliff found his anger dissipated.

“Well,” he responded in a softened tone, “I guess you’re safe enough for to-night, but go straight back to your room and *stay* there, do you understand? Don’t come out again no matter what you may hear, and meet me at eight o’clock in the morning around the corner in a small restaurant you’ll find there. I’ll decide meantime what to do with you—we can’t talk here! What ‘way’ do you mean that you can help?”

“Through the little girl—Bessie!” Ethel Jepson declared. “I knew even when we talked to her over the ‘phone the other night that she’d be the one to approach, and a woman could get her confidence better

than a man. She goes with Mrs. Franck's little boy over to the park to play every morning, and I always could get on with kiddies. It may take a few days, but when once I have gained her confidence I know I can get something from her, about that man who was to call up her uncle Thursday night and didn't, even if she was told not to dare to speak of it! I'll meet you in the restaurant to-morrow at six instead if you'll let me; by that time I ought to have something to tell you."

Cliff Nichols wavered but finally gave his reluctant consent, and watched while she crept back to the rear apartment on the next floor.

She was right, of course. The child's knowledge of her uncle's affairs and those of his friends might be limited, especially if he were connected with a gang of crooks, but she evidently knew enough to make her dangerous or she would not have been cautioned not to speak, and unknowingly she might give Ethel a valuable clew.

Cliff shuddered at the thought of their young secretary's possible danger, but he should have known her better than to think she would sit by passively while the mystery remained unsolved, and at least he was at hand to protect her in any sudden emergency.

The wide-open saloon he had followed Charlie to was a resort for denizens of the underworld, that was patent. The weak, furtive faces of its patrons were unmistakable, with thievery and every sort of petty crime written all over them, and Charlie was tarred

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with the same brush. If the thin, hard-worked little woman who had opened the door to her guests was his sister and the mother of the little girl, she was plainly not of a criminal type; but the look of covert apprehension which seemed habitual to her denoted that she knew of her brother's mode of life and feared for him. He had been warned and she would be hopelessly reticent; only the child remained.

In the morning he left early as though to go to work, but took up his stand at the nearest entrance to the small park that clung to the bottom of the steep cliff, crowned with the huge cathedral. Soon children, alone or in groups, came straggling in to play, and then young mothers appeared with shabby baby carriages and go-carts. Cliff watched and waited patiently and at last a small tow-headed boy approached accompanied by a gentle-faced little girl a few feet taller than he. She was neatly dressed and shining from soap and water, with her brown hair in two thin, decorous little braids looped behind each ear, and she lugged a huge doll arrayed in an obviously new and gorgeous gown of bright blue silk.

Cliff recalled the dress which "Jen" had made for the doll "Joe" had given to Bessie. At the same moment Ethel Jepson came strolling along with a book and a small sewing bag, and, giving him a glance without the slightest shade of recognition in it, she entered the park and seated herself on a bench near where the two children were playing, somewhat osten-

tatiously producing a box of chocolates from her bag.

Cliff waited then only long enough to see the boy run to her, beckoning to his companion, and then he returned to the house, leaving the apartment door ajar as before.

He explained to the landlady that he felt ill and had decided to lay off for the day, and patiently submitted to being dosed and coddled by the good-natured woman; but he sighed with relief when she departed to market, and settled himself for a long vigil.

It was one unproductive of result, for the door of the opposite flat remained closed and no one came to it. If Charlie had not gone out while Cliff was watching the park entrance he must have decided to lay low and his sister with him, for there was no sign of either of them all day.

The little girl returned at noon, going out again at three to reappear when the sun got low; but nothing else occurred and at six Cliff left for the restaurant, where he found Ethel awaiting him.

"Where have you been since morning?" he demanded. "I've been watching all day and you didn't come back from the park!"

"No, I didn't!" she dimpled. "I thought I had better not hang around the house too much, especially when there wasn't any use in it, since I couldn't see any more of Bessie. We're getting along nicely and I don't think it'll take very long to get out of her all she knows."

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“What have you learned so far?” Cliff asked, when their order had been taken. “She looks like a shy little thing.”

“She is, but Johnny Franck knew me, of course, and so she took me on faith and the candy helped to break the ice. If they’re not both sick from it to-morrow I’m going to show her how to fold and cut a new kind of paper doll. That won’t amuse Johnny and he’ll run off and play by himself when he sees there isn’t more candy, so I’ll have a better chance to talk to her. I didn’t want to ask her too many questions at first, for she’s warned not to talk to strangers, but she’ll forget after a while.” Ethel paused to spear an oyster daintily and then went on: “A friend of her mother made that dress for the doll she was carrying and brought it to her last night. Did you see her?”

Cliff nodded.

“Yes. She came with a man who looked like a typical young tough.”

“He’s a short change artist with a carnival!” Ethel laughed. “You would have died at the simple way the kiddie gave it away without dreaming what she was talking about. The doll was given to her by ‘Joe,’ whoever he is, and she seemed awfully fond of him, but I only gathered that he was a pal of her uncle. She mentioned an ‘Al,’ too, and somebody called ‘Lefty.’ ”

“I’ve heard of them both, and seen them, too, for I followed Charlie to a speak-easy late last night and he held a conference with some one he called Lefty,

and then a red-faced man talked to him, who was the proprietor of the place, I think, and though Charlie replied very low, I believe I heard him call the other 'Al.' ” Cliff told her of the letters he had opened and the snatches of conversation in the saloon, and when he had finished he asked: “Was that all Bessie told you?”

“No. She’s staying home from school this week because she’s just getting over the mumps; her mother just sold out a little fancy store she had around on the Avenue and that’s why they’ve had a ‘phone put in the flat. They used to use the one in the store, I guess; it would have been better for her uncle, if he’s carrying on any crooked business.” Ethel sat back while the soup was substituted for the oyster plates and then continued: “I asked her what her mother was going to do now and she said she didn’t know, but she herself was going to be sent away to school next year and only come home for the holidays. She chattered a lot about somebody named ‘Annie’ who was ‘awful pretty and stylish and crazy about seeing the horses run’; she’d won quite a lot of money on them, too, and Bessie’s Uncle Charlie was just wild about her.

“There isn’t a more superstitious woman in the world than the one that follows the races, Mr. Nichols, and I got ‘Annie’s’ last name and her address from Bessie and went around to see her in the afternoon.”

Cliff stared.

“What excuse did you make, and what does her being superstitious have to do with it?”

"Everything, for I brought a pretty well soiled pack of cards with me and told her I was a fortune teller that Mrs. Farley had sent to her." Ethel laughed again. "She's a big, frowsy-looking blonde, but very pretty, with a lot of small-stoned rings, and she fell for my game like a baby. I made two dollars, but it was worth it, for I'd looked up the dope-sheet in the paper first and honestly, I picked the winner for her to-day! What do you think of that? I shouldn't wonder if you'd see her pretty soon, for I told her a dark young man was mad about her, and that something had happened that was going to get him into a terrible lot of trouble; something connected with a message he'd expected but didn't get, and that he was frightened to death about it right now."

"You didn't go too far?" Cliff asked anxiously. "We don't want to frighten him any more than he is now!"

"No. She'll find out, of course, that Bessie's mother never heard of me, but that won't matter as long as she doesn't catch sight of me and I'll take good care of that," Ethel exclaimed, as she cut the juicy filet mignon before her. "This girl, Annie Leonard, was scared herself when I told her, but I saw that it didn't surprise her and she honestly believed I read it in the cards! I moved them around a little, the way Mr. Roper has showed me at odd times, and I made the death card come out right next to the jacks of clubs and hearts, meaning Uncle Charlie and the man who was to have telephoned to him and didn't, and she gave a

little scream. She grew so white I thought she was going to faint and then she cried: 'He didn't have anything to do with it! Oh, I've been afraid of this! My Gawd, if it all comes out!' Then she remembered herself and stopped, and I told her a few nice things to sort of take the curse off and then quit. She asked me to come again in a few days but I'd got all I could out of her. She knows about the murder and that Charlie is mixed up in it some way but I couldn't get her to mention the name of the other man. Look here, Mr. Nichols, Bessie may tell me something tomorrow in the park that you ought to hear. If you aren't going to be busy, why don't you take a newspaper and hang around, and if you see me talking to her and I should happen to drop my scissors you could pick them up for me and I'd recognize you. She might be shy again and shut up like a little clam, but you could suggest taking us for a little ride, or something, and I'd get her going again. What do you think of it?"

"I think it's a sensible plan," Cliff approved. "I'll be there early."

He was as good as his word, and apparently deep in the morning's news when the little girl appeared, alone this time. She had a large paper pad instead of the doll and looked about eagerly before seating herself on the bench opposite, spreading out her small skirts primly and turning out her round little sandaled toes.

Her face was not overintelligent but very sweet,

with calm, steady eyes and a sensitive mouth, and her pensive gaze was fastened on the gate, till at last she jumped up with a pleased little cry. Ethel was entering with her work bag on her arm.

“Hello, Mith Jefferthon!” the clear voice piped. “I brought my pad with me! You didn’t forget?”

“About the paper dolls?” Ethel laughed with a childish note in her own tones. “No, and I have a great big pair of scissors. See them?”

She seated herself beside the little girl and held up a huge pair of shears in meaning reminder to Cliff Nichols.

“You cut them in a row?” Bessie sat down again, too, and watched absorbedly, while Ethel folded and cut, and finally evolved a series of rather acrobatic looking dolls, holding each other by the hand. The child was delighted and appeared to be chattering gayly, but her small voice, now that it was no longer raised in excitement, failed to carry to Cliff’s ears.

He could tell by watching her expression and that of Ethel, as she put an apparently innocent question or two, that the dolls had ceased to be the subject of the conversation and at last, to his relief, the scissors suddenly fell ringing on to the pavement.

Bessie slipped down politely but Cliff was before her and, retrieving the scissors, he presented them, hat in hand. Then he paused in ostensibly pleased surprise.

“Thank you—why, Mr. Smith!” Ethel exclaimed. “To think of its being you! This is a gentleman I

used to work for, Bessie. He has a toy store all filled with the loveliest things and maybe he'll show them to you some time. Would you like to sit down with us, Mr. Smith? I wish we had one of your paint-boxes to give our dollies nice pink cheeks and blue eyes!"

"You shall have one!" Cliff promised, as he seated himself. "I'll be glad to send it to your little friend if you'll give me her address."

He turned to the child who was blushing with embarrassment and joy.

"Why, she lives in the same house I do, but I don't know what apartment; tell Mr. Smith, Bessie."

The child complied shyly and Cliff gravely made a note of it, then Ethel added:

"Bessie's got a big doll, Mr. Smith, nicer almost than any in your store, and it was given to her by her Uncle Joe."

"No, he isn't my uncle," Bessie disclaimed politely. "My uncle's Uncle Charlie, but Joe's a friend of his."

"He must be a friend of yours, too," Cliff remarked with a smile.

"Yeth, thir, he ith!" she lisped, as she had over the telephone, but the impediment became less noticeable as she gained in confidence. "He used to play with me, and my mother laughed because he's so big and has arms like that!" She stretched her own small arms out to their widest extent, but her serene face clouded as she dropped them to her sides once more. "I'm going to miss him an awful lot."

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"Has he gone away?" Cliff made the question sound as indifferent as he could.

"Uncle Charlie says he's going, and we won't even see him to say good-by!" Her lips trembled slightly. "I haven't seen him in ever so long but he was coming last week, only he didn't. Oh, I forgot!"

She stopped, flushing still deeper with embarrassment, but Ethel laughed lightly.

"That's funny! Didn't you have a friend when I worked for you named Joe, Mr. Smith? Seems to me I remember his calling you up a lot."

"Yes, of course!" Cliff played up to her lead. "What is your friend's name, Bessie? Maybe it's the same!"

But the child shook her smooth, brown head.

"No, thir. My Joe didn't know anybody that had a toy store. I—I ought to go home, my mamma will be looking for me."

She started to wriggle down off the seat once more, but Cliff had a sudden inspiration.

"I wish I knew a place around here where we could get some nice ice cream cones!" He turned to Ethel. "You'd like one, wouldn't you?"

She nodded and Bessie cried:

"Oh, I know! I know a place right across the street!"

"Then would you like to run over and get some for all of us?" Cliff placed some coins in her small palm. "Get as many as you can carry."

"My mamma mightn't want me to—for myself, I

mean." She hesitated, and then her face cleared. "The doctor let me have some last week, though, when my face was all mumped out! I'll be right back!"

She sped away and Cliff asked reflectively:

"Do you suppose she will?"

"Of course!" Ethel replied with conviction. "She's an honest little thing, and the ice-cream will loosen her tongue. Keep on talking about Joe and try to make her think you really know him. If she tells her mother about this talk, she won't be allowed to play here any more, of course; so this is our last chance."

Bessie flew back, a large paper bag of cones balanced carefully between her hands, and sighed with enjoyment when Cliff opened it and handed one to her.

"Oh, it's good! Joe used to take me there to buy them!" Unconsciously she renewed the subject and Cliff was quick to take advantage of it.

"I didn't always have a toy store, and maybe I do know Joe, after all, and your uncle. His name isn't Charlie Curran, is it?"

"Oh, yes!" Bessie clapped her hands. "And Joe's is 'Geiger'!"

"That's the fellow! I haven't seen him in a long while," Cliff exclaimed with a hearty assumption of pleasure. "He used to have a lot of jewelry and silver and stuff to sell; that's how I met him, I bought a lot of it. Did you ever know Mrs. Regner? She's a friend of Joe's and your uncle's, too."

"No, sir!" Bessie shook her head again. "But

that's my Joe! He has awful pretty things sometimes, he showed them to my mamma and me—rings and bracelets and things."

"Where is he now, do you know?" Cliff pursued. "I'd like to see him and maybe I could do some business with him on the side before he goes away. Where did you say he was going?"

"I don't know." The childish voice held a sorry note once more. "I never did know where he lived but he used to be at Al's a lot. Do you know Al?"

"Yes, he has a café, hasn't he?" Cliff paused and at her nod went on carefully. "Maybe Charlie will see him?"

"No, he won't. He 'phoned to Uncle Charlie at Al's one night last week, and Uncle Charlie gave him mamma's new number and asked him to call up home in an hour, but he didn't. Uncle Charlie didn't seem to think very much about it that night, but he was still waiting up when I went to sleep, and in the morning he was awful worried! He took mamma in the kitchen and talked an awful long while; and when they came out they told me I wasn't to say anything about Joe to anybody, not even let on that we knew him or ever expected him to call us up, but of course it's all right when you're a friend of his! If you see him I wish you'd tell him how I miss him!"

"I shall." Cliff dared not glance at Ethel but he felt rather than heard her quickened, tremulous breathing. He staked everything on a final question. "Do

you know where Al's mother lives? He calls her 'the old woman.' ”

“That isn't his mother!” Bessie giggled. “That's his sister. She takes a lot of his friends to board, over at her house at Brookfield! If you see Joe, tell him I think he is mean to go away without saying good-by!”

CHAPTER XXI

THE MIDNIGHT WARNING

WHEN little Bessie, surfeited with ice cream cones and clutching a regiment of paper dolls, had run homeward, Ethel Jepson turned to her partner on the park bench with shining eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Nichols, we've got him! It was Joe Geiger killed old Mr. Monckton! He 'phoned Charlie Curran from the very house and wrote down on the wall the number Charlie gave him!"

"It looks like it!" Cliff replied. "How much luggage have you got at Mrs. Franck's?"

"Only two bags with just plain things like this." Ethel glanced down at her simple little black suit with the cheap fur scarf. "She thinks I'm a stenog. out of a job."

"Well, you're going to obey orders this time, young lady!" Cliff Nichols' mouth was set in an unusually firm line. "Don't go back there on any account! The child has told her mother by now and possibly her uncle, if he's at home as I think he is. They'll see through the plant at once and know she's been trapped, and they won't hesitate at anything to put us both out of the way. I didn't mean to tell you, but already one

of the boys has been drugged and another one gagged and bound at the point of a gun in broad day, so you can see what might happen to either of us, and I will not have you run any further risk!"

"Goodness!" Ethel's eyes danced. "I've missed all that! It—it wasn't Mr. Powell that any of that happened to?"

The question came with a sudden catch in her breath and a note of apprehension that Cliff had never heard in her indomitable young voice before, and he glanced at her in swift surprise.

"No, it was Mr. Roper and Mr. Howe. But I must have absolute obedience in this, Ethel! You've paid for your room in advance?"

"Of course, from Saturday night, when I took it."

"So you were here ahead of me?" He smiled in spite of himself. "Write a little note telling Mrs. Franck you've got a position to leave the city at once, and send it by messenger from the office, with instructions to get your things. Tell him to check them at the Grand Central and we'll send for them later. Then stay in the office, do you understand, my dear? When Mr. Powell comes in tell him I want him to escort you home personally every night and call for you in the morning until he hears from me. There mustn't be any mistake about that!"

"I've taken care of myself since I could walk, but of course I'll do as you say," Ethel murmured docilely. "I'd hate to have Mr. Powell think I was afraid, though! You're going to find Joe Geiger all by your-

self? Why did you ask Bessie about 'the old woman'?"

"Because from something Al said to Charlie Curran on Sunday night I think she knows a few things about Joe and where he is," Cliff explained. "Everybody concerned will be warned now, of course. I've got to try to reach Brookfield ahead of any message and I haven't a minute to lose! Remember my instructions now, Ethel, and follow them to the letter. I'm going to put you in a taxi and send you straight back to the office."

They found a row of cabs near the park entrance, and handing her into one of them Cliff added a final admonition.

"Don't tell any one but Rex Powell that you've even seen me, and give any excuse you can for your own absence; I'm not afraid that it won't be a good one! I'll mail instructions to each of the boys when I want them to take a hand. Good luck, Ethel, and let me find you at your desk when I come in!"

Ethel laughed and nodded, but when the taxi door closed and she was bowling off downtown, the light of adventure dawned again in her eyes and crystallized in a look of resolve. She would obey—to a certain point. Mr. Powell could come for her and take her home, but the hours between needn't all be spent at that desk, although she would do her best to manage to be there when Cliff Nichols returned. The case would be over by then, however, and the murderer found.

It was lunch-time when she arrived at the office of The Shadows, but the panel between the ante-room and Rex Powell's sanctum was open a trifle, as she let herself softly in with her key, and the first word she heard was her own name uttered in the chief's resonant tones.

"Ethel? No, I haven't been able to learn anything about her, though, under a different name, I met Mrs. Gorham, as Cliff suggested. I don't mind telling you, gentlemen, that I'm in great anxiety!"

"I—I'm here!" Ethel announced in a small, very meek voice.

There was a sudden sound of chairs being violently pushed back and then the panel was thrust fully aside and Rex appeared, followed by George Roper and Henry Corliss, their faces alight with eager surprise and relief.

"Where have you been?" the former demanded.

Ethel had not given that a thought in spite of Cliff's reminder, but now she replied glibly:

"I guess everybody's got a family! I'm not boasting about mine but sometimes I get word from—from what's left of it, and I have to—to look them up and—and kind of steer them off! I said I went away on my own business, didn't I?"

"Yes, and you're about as worthy of belief, my dear child, as any other female Ananias!" George eyed her with grim suspicion. "We don't want to pry into your affairs, if they *are* your affairs, but we feel responsible for you."

"To whom?" Ethel asked coolly. "I'm not under probation, am I? There wasn't anything much for me to do around here, for Mr. Nichols told me on Saturday that you all thought Mr. Monckton killed his father himself. You were doped, weren't you, Mr. Roper, and Mr. Howe was tied up and gagged—?"

"How do you know that?" George interrupted, his long countenance reddening. "We never told—I mean it didn't happen to Phil before Sunday, and you were gone by then! I know it! You've been up to some mischief!"

"A fat chance we have of making her tell if she doesn't want to!" Harry Corliss remarked sententiously, but his small eyes twinkled. "She's back anyway, and evidently none the worse. You haven't an idea, my child, when Cliff is going to show up again?"

"No, I haven't!" Ethel, for the first time in her life, was relieved that she could tell the truth. "Has anything happened that you wouldn't mind telling me?"

"There's one thing, since you still appear to take a little interest in the case, Ethel." Rex spoke with a note of grave reproach. "It was Mr. Monckton's own father who was trying to ruin him! That shows how deep the bitterness was, and makes the case against him fairly complete. The old gentleman paid detectives to follow him and queer his attempt to enlist any outside capital. Mr. Roper found that out from the chief private detective himself."

"The old wretch!" Ethel exclaimed indignantly, adding in quick afterthought: "But Richard Monckton didn't know that! He didn't dream it was his father!"

Her hearers glanced at each other and George coughed.

"Shall we finish our talk?" He waved toward the council room. "We are all at rather loose ends till Cliff reappears."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you heard from him soon," Ethel remarked with elaborate carelessness. "The last time I saw him he said something about writing to you if he was too busy this week to come in."

Henry and George Roper had filed back into Rex Powell's office, but the leader himself lingered and bent over the secretary's desk.

"The last time you saw him?" he echoed in a low voice. "Ethel, when was the last time?"

She smiled quietly, then her face grew grave.

"I have a message for you alone, Mr. Powell. I'm afraid you may not like it and I don't want you to think I'm scared or anything, but I've got to tell you. Mr. Nichols would like it if you could arrange to—to go home with me from the office every night till you hear from him, and call for me in the morning. Just you, he said; none of the others."

"Good heavens!" he murmured in a shocked undertone. "It is as bad as that? I might have known you didn't desert us, my dear, but tell me, have you been in any actual danger? I shall never forgive Cliff—!"

"No, I haven't, and anyway he—he didn't send me!" she interrupted with quick loyalty. "Please, I can't tell you any more, I—I'm obeying orders! He didn't say anything about lunch-time, though, and perhaps I'd better go now while you are here—?"

"No, I'll finish my talk with the others and take you myself," Rex declared with decision. "You must not leave this office or your home without me, Ethel, till this case is settled. Can it be that we're mistaken after all, and the woman did arrange to have Monckton's town house robbed?"

"The woman?" she caught him up, and her quick mind traveled back to a question which Cliff had asked little Bessie that morning. "Do you mean Mrs. Regner?"

Rex looked startled but shook his head with a laugh.

"That remains to be seen, my dear!" he declared. "Remember, no stirring out without me!"

Cliff Nichols had crossed the ferry and at that moment was boarding a trolley car near the Palisades. He had recalled vaguely when the child Bessie had mentioned "Brookfield" that it was somewhere in northern New Jersey, and consultation of a road map showed that it lay half an hour's run back from the Hudson. He didn't even know Al's last name, much less his sister's, but the village was apparently a small one and any shopkeeper would be able to tell him who among the inhabitants took boarders.

He reached it at last—a dead-alive little hamlet with a single, straggling village street in a cluster of

small, unpretentious cottages and outlying farms, and he made his way to the post office.

"I'm trying to find a lady somewhere in Brookfield who takes people to board," he explained with an engaging smile to the tired-looking postmistress. "They're gentlemen, mostly, who come to her, only a few, and they stay just a short time. She has a brother in New York—"

"I guess you mean Mrs. Dobson," the woman interrupted with a smile. "She's got a little farm out on the road to Springville and folks go there for a rest; men mostly, as you say. Other people around here take summer boarders, but she has them all the year through."

Dobson! Cliff thanked his informant mechanically, inquired the road to Springville and departed in a daze of surprised thought.

The private detective Radway Wicks had told George and Phil of Lucy Regner's past connection with the famous Dobson gang, so lately broken up; could Al's sister be the wife of its ringleader, who was now "up the river" on a long-term sentence? The name was not such a common one that this could be a mere coincidence, and it would explain many things.

A farmer plowing in a field about a mile out directed him easily to the Dobson farm. It was a lonely, somewhat weather-beaten little house set in spreading meadows, with a dark, stagnant-looking pond back of it and a patch of thick, desolate woods across the road. It looked dreary and forbidding, and the middle-aged

woman who came to the door in answer to his knock did not lighten the impression. She was thin and hard-visaged, as coarsely florid as "Al" himself, and the likeness between them was unmistakable. Cliff came to a quick decision.

"Mrs. Dobson?" He stepped quickly in without waiting for an invitation and the look he cast over his shoulder was a masterly gesture of furtive apprehension. "I knew your husband—up there. When I got out two months ago he told me to come to you if I wanted to lay low for a while. He spoke of your brother Al, too, but I don't know him. I've been sticking to my own crowd and we're getting out some new paper, but I can't start shoving the queer for a while till the bulls let up trailing me because of past performances. I'm giving it to you straight, for I wouldn't make any trouble for you if you took me in for a few days."

The woman eyed him for a minute with shrewd speculation, and then asked in a voice as harsh as a man's:

"What's your name? I don't know what you're talking about, for I'm a widow; but I take boarders now and then, and I mind my business while they mind theirs."

"That's all right!" Cliff winked broadly. "Of course you've got to know who you're getting in your house. My moniker is Clem Norton and my picture is over in Brooklyn if you want to verify it, worse luck. I didn't sport this mustache and the glasses then, but

you'll recognize me all right! That was for a check I was careless in autographing—you see I'm coming clean! I'm tired and I want a chance to turn around without the dicks at my heels. I'm flush and I'll make it anything you say for a room and three squares."

The old alias had fallen haltingly from his lips, but Mrs. Dobson was sharp enough to recognize the truth in his tone and she vouchsafed him a wintry smile.

"I'll take a chance on you; I've heard of 'High-brow Clem,' I think, and there's nobody else stopping with me just now. You're travelin' light, but twenty-five a week is all right with me."

Cliff produced a well-filled wallet and paid her on the spot for a fortnight in advance, then followed her up the matting-covered stairs to a small and not over clean room at the rear where, after filling the pitcher on the washstand and placing two thin towels on the rack, she left him.

She had lied about being a widow, of course. Had she lied also about having no one else under her roof, or was he on a wild-goose chase? Cliff sat down gingerly on the edge of the creaking bed to think. She believed in his identity, but she would take no risk by admitting it; and it was plain that no warning could have reached her yet from her brother or Charlie Curran, if Joe Geiger was really hiding there. He would have to watch and bide his time.

The afternoon was unconscionably long, but after a

careful survey from his window of the still, gloomy pond bordered by rushes and the sagging-roofed barn with one old man pottering about it, he opened his door a crack and listened. The house was so quiet that the ticking of the tall clock on the stairs came to him with almost startling distinctness and from below in the kitchen the rattle of stove-lids grated metallicly on the air, but no other sound reached him and he flung himself down on the bed, at last, to while away the time with the bundle of newspapers which he had brought.

They gave him one item of information which made his heart sink like lead; Richard Monckton was to be arraigned for indictment in three days! The accusation was open now, the machinery of the law was in motion and less than seventy hours remained to gather the evidence necessary to block it!

No one came near the farmhouse until suppertime, and when Cliff descended in response to the strident bell he asked if his landlady had a telephone.

"No use for one," Mrs. Dobson replied as she motioned to one of the two places laid at the kitchen table. "The folks who stop with me don't usually want to be bothered with calls, but you'll find a couple of pay stations down in the village."

"I don't need one myself just now, not for two or three days, and I won't do much strolling around before then," Cliff laughed, as he seated himself, hoping that the relief he felt wasn't too obvious. Any warning, then, must come by personal messenger!

The supper was unexpectedly good and Cliff ate heartily, then smoked a cigarette on the porch in the warm, fragrant darkness before ostensibly turning in. There was still no indication of a hidden presence, but his quick eye had noted that four biscuits remained in a pan in the open oven, the coffee pot was large and filled to the brim, and two extra slices of cold meat had been put aside on the platter. They couldn't have been intended for the old hired man, for his supper was already spread on a little side table by the sink, and Cliff drew his own conclusions.

Mrs. Dobson was still moving about in the kitchen and he bade her good-night as he went up to his room, but once there he removed his shoes, tying their laces together, and then saw to the condition of his pistol before placing it under his pillow.

He blew out the lamp and lying down pulled the covers up about him, but listened with all his ears for a sound in the house or through the open window. The clock on the stairs ticked the long hours away until midnight, and nothing but the muffled padding of heavy, softly slippered feet thrice past his door came to him.

Perhaps this move had not been anticipated, after all, by Bessie's Uncle Charlie or his associates; perhaps the child had forgotten to repeat his question about Al's "old woman" and when Mrs. Dobson's confidence was wholly gained Joe Geiger might show himself on the scene. It seemed probable that no warning would come that night, in any event, and

Cliff was just on the point of disrobing and retiring in real earnest when a sound reached him from the road that made him spring up suddenly and peer out of his window.

Although it commanded only a view of the rear, he would be able to see the reflection of a ray of light from the road; but there was none, yet the muffled chugging of a motor was approaching. An automobile, running as silently as possible and without lights!

Cliff had only time to spring back into bed and emit a realistic snore when some one began hastily to move about in a room somewhere near, and, when the car stopped abruptly before the house and the engine was shut off, the same heavy but soft footsteps descended the stair, after pausing before his door till another snore from him reassured the listener.

Then he rose stealthily once more, flung his shoes around his neck by their laces, and clutching his pistol made for the window. He had noted in the afternoon that the flat roof of a little porch stretched a few feet below and now he dropped lightly to it from the sill and slipped down its trellised side to the ground, then, stooping low, he crept around the house.

The car, a low-swung roadster, stood dark and apparently empty before the steps, but a tiny gleam of light came through the shuttered window of a front room which Cliff had never entered, and he crouched beneath it.

Nothing reached his ears but the low, indistinguishable murmur of voices, Mrs. Dobson's harsh tones,

subdued but quickened, and deeper, masculine ones. Then a shadow crossed the shutters and a third voice, whining and shaking, but masculine also, joined the other two and Cliff tensed suddenly. If they went upstairs to confront him, and found him missing, a hue and cry would be raised and he would have to take to the woods across the way or commandeer the car, his chances of ultimate escape being, in either case, extremely problematical. He waited in an agony of suspense, but not for long, for the door opened suddenly, and in the glow from the lighted lamp within, Al's heavy figure was outlined for an instant, with a stocky form behind him, gesturing excitedly with long arms.

It was obvious that neither intended to waste time then in bothering about him, for Al jumped into the car, and when the other endeavored to scramble up beside him he thrust him away with a force that made the stocky figure reel.

"Give me a lift, Al, for God's sake!" A choking cry came from the man as he steadied himself. "Just for a few miles till I can hit a trolley line! You wouldn't beat it and leave me with them as close as this!"

"Nothing doing, Joe!" The answer sent a thrill through Cliff's veins. "I'm on the square with you boys and I'd do anything in reason, but I ain't getting caught with you on board! You'll be all right if you lay off the snow, and this time to-morrow you can be miles away before the word goes out. Don't try any rough stuff, you know—well, I mean what I say!

Good luck, and watch your step. I'll come across if you need any more. So long!"

The motor started and the car slid off down the road, while the man left behind, with a smothered sound between an oath and a sob, went off at a shambling run in the opposite direction. Cliff jerked apart the strings of his shoes, slipped his feet into them, and followed like a darker moving shadow in the night, while from the farmhouse behind them a sudden cry went up in the Dobson woman's hoarse tones:

"He's gone!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE CELLAR ON HESTER STREET

THE pawnshop of Mr. Lazarus on Hester Street was brilliantly lighted on Wednesday night, displaying its cheap jewelry and pathetic household goods to the best advantage, but revealing nothing that could by any stretch of the imagination be looked upon as stolen goods.

An examination of the smaller of his safes inside would have told a different story, for it contained a respectable fortune in diamonds and colored stones, all, curiously enough, without their settings; and the packing cases in the cellar were filled with costly ornaments and heterogeneous collection of old silver and gold.

Mr. Lazarus himself, greed struggling with fear on his bearded countenance, sat before his desk in the little back room and thoughtfully contemplated the banknotes laid enticingly before him.

"I couldn't do it!" he asserted at last. "Not for a century, anyhow! I give you boys an even break always, many a time I take things that it isn't easy to get rid of, and I lose often on the deal because you fellows have got to turn them over quick and I wouldn't disappoint you; but this is something else again, and more risky. Stolen goods is one thing, Charlie my

friend, but hiding a wanted guy is another, and how do I know you tell me all the truth?"

"Say, look here, Lazarus!" The young man he called "Charlie" leaned persuasively forward in his chair. "I'm giving it to you straight, and you never knew me to be yellow, did you? I tell you they're after Joe for that Ingram business, and the diamonds from the necklace came to you for a quarter of what you'll get for them! You ought to be willing to do Joe a good turn!"

"Always good turns I am doing," Mr. Lazarus retorted querulously. "To nobody do I owe anything; and how do I know Joe ain't wanted for something besides the necklace business yet? Something happened last week that looks kind of funny to me! I wouldn't say a word about it to nobody, but maybe Joe is in it and for that the bulls want him! It ain't my business, *Gott sei dank*, but I ain't hidin' no momser in my cellar that's wanted on a charge like that, for a hundredt dollar, I'll tell it to the world! At my age if I should go up they might as well give me life!"

"But Joe ain't done anything last week, I'm saying!" Charlie persisted doggedly. "You got him dead wrong now, Lazarus! There ain't even a broadcast out for him; only a bunch of no-account private dicks that Ingram's called in."

"Private fellers, eh?" the old pawnbroker interrupted slyly. "You sure they ain't calling themselves 'The Shadows' by no chance? I read about them schlemmils somewheres!"

"Sure they ain't!" Charlie shook his head, but a dull flush mounted in his cheeks. "Look here, I'll make it two hundred, but that's the best I can do, honest! Take it or leave it! You ain't got to do anything now but put out the lights and go upstairs to bed. If you don't happen to think of that door, leading into the cellar of the closed-up gin-mill next door and out on the alley, it ain't to be wondered at, for it hasn't been used in years and you don't know nothing about how it come to be open, get me? I'd take him home to my sister's, it's that safe; but the damned flatties are lampin' the layout up there and we've got the kid to think of. In the morning when you take down the shutters there'll be nobody in the cellar and not a box so much as moved! It's pretty good pickin's for one night's lodging. Think it over, Lazarus!"

Mr. Lazarus meditated for a moment longer, but the sight of the augmented roll of bills was too much for his caution and he succumbed. He stroked his scraggy beard.

"All right, I take it!" he shrugged. "Get out now quick before I change my mind yet! The door in the cellar will be open when Joe comes, but mind he don't smoke with all that excelsior around; he's sniffing that coke again and maybe he forgets!"

Charlie promised and took his leave by the side door, but just around the corner, in a teeming tenement, a black-eyed, black-haired woman waited for him and when they moved off a figure loitering in the

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shadows of a doorway crept forth and slunk after them.

Meanwhile Mr. Lazarus turned out his display lights, and leaving only one small globe glowing he descended to the cellar, picked his way between barrels and cases with the surety of long habit and unbolted a low door half hidden in the masonry of the wall. Then he mounted hastily to his shop once more, saw to it that the fastenings were in shape at door and windows, and ascended the second flight of narrow stairs leading up from the back room to his exceedingly dirty couch in a chamber littered with the overflow of cheap wares from below.

An hour passed, and then all at once there came a soft scratching sound in the wall of the rat infested cellar, and in another moment the little door opened stealthily and the pinpoint of light from an electric torch swept about like a spark.

"Come on, Joe; you're all right now!" A woman's whisper cut the silence. "Don't forget to bolt the door again after I'm gone, and curl up on that roll of old rugs over there. Cut out the snow for one night, if you've got any with you, and try to get a little rest."

"God, I'm tired," a weary voice croaked. "I ain't got any coke, honest, and I'm off the stuff, anyway! You're sure gonna get me on that freighter tomorrow?"

"Haven't I seen you through so far?" the woman demanded. "Shut up and lay low now and I'll meet

you at six back in the alley, here. Is that good enough? Don't forget the door!"

It slammed softly as her voice ceased, and her footsteps died away in the echoing stillness, but the solitary occupant of the cellar did indeed proceed to forget it with promptness and despatch. He fumbled nervously with the edge of the lining of his coat and finally produced a small packet of paper which he examined shakily by the aid of his flashlight. It contained some crystals of fine white powder, and sprinkling them on the back of his hand he inhaled them avidly through his nostrils. Had he not been so deeply engaged he might have been aware of a slight creaking, as the door in the wall opened once more and a slim shape slipped through, closing it carefully again and standing back against it, scarcely breathing in the darkness; but Joe was oblivious.

With a sigh of satisfaction he dropped back on the roll of rugs and his heavy lids dropped over his blood-shot eyes.

Not in many a night had he slept, except in fitful moments, and for thirty-six hours he had not dared snatch a moment's rest. That sudden alarm of the previous evening, the nightmare of endless miles of travel over a rough road, where he constantly lost his way in the darkness and there seemed ever the consciousness of some one just behind, the ferry at last and then a long stretch of deserted streets in the gray-ing dawn, the getting turned down by one after another of the pals on whom he'd depended and finally

meeting Charlie just outside Al's, where he hadn't dared to enter—it was all like a hideous, distorted dream now!

Good old Charlie had persuaded Al to take him in for the day, and had arranged with old Lazarus, the fence, for this brief shelter. In the morning he'd float downstream, sitting pretty on a freighter bound for New Orleans, and he'd never hit this cursed town again!

What was that? It seemed to Joe that something moved—something bigger than a rat and more cautious! He half raised himself, and his fingers crooked instinctively about the gun sticking out of the waistband of his trousers. Then they relaxed and he sank back once more.

Nothing there of course! It wasn't worth while to flash his light, for if any one had followed, it would only give them the drop on him, but it was only his wretched nerves, gone to pieces because, in Al's presence and the woman's, he couldn't get at his precious packet of "snow."

He was better now, soothed and able to think shrewdly of the morrow. He'd been clever, mighty clever; there couldn't be any hitch now, and once in New Orleans he could open up that money belt that even Al, even the woman didn't know he had on, and spend, and forget, and learn to sleep again—

By God, there *was* somebody there! This time he sprang up with his gun drawn, lighting, like a cat, on his toes with his knees slightly bent and his head

thrust down between his shoulders. Why didn't they come on, damn them! Why did they wait, skulking there in the darkness to drive a guy out of his mind with the suspense of it!

He shook with temptation to switch on his light, to scream out defiance at the menace waiting there to seize him, but he knew the madness of such an impulse. His ears seemed unusually keen, and in the stillness rasped by his own raucous breathing he heard steps, slow, measured and incredibly light, creeping toward him!

Now they were verging off to the right; there was a soft thud as they came in contact with a barrel or crate—they were circling but coming ever nearer, and insensibly he circled with them in an opposite direction, striving to work away from the wall.

By a miracle Joe escaped the litter all about, by a miracle he held on grimly to the remnants of his self-control, while his flaming fancy pictured the pursuer he could not see! Minutes, hours, seemed to pass while that grotesque dance went on in the pitch blackness with only the slither of feet and his own hoarse breath to pierce that uncanny silence, and then something snapped in Joe's brain.

With a scream more animal than human he leaped suddenly forward, firing a wild fusillade from his pistol that seemed to blast the solid masonry about him, his face in the flashes of spitting flame distorted and fiendish beyond semblance of living mortal by the rage and despair that ravaged his sick soul.

Clifford Nichols, the opponent in that protracted duel of endurance, felt almost a sense of relief when the end came at last; his own pistol spoke when the first reverberation of Joe's opening fire was crashed in upon the second shot, but a searing agony darted like the thrust of a knife through his side and he fell with a strangling gasp just as the cellar was flooded with light.

He must be dying, of course—delirious or crazy, for there was Joe Geiger over near the opposite wall, but it seemed as if Ethel Jepson, of all people, stood full in the glare, knocking his pistol spinning from his hand and grappling single-handed with the crazed crook and murderer, while a woman whom he had never seen was struggling in the grasp of Phil Howe there by the cellar door!

Then the lights faded, and with the shrill call of the first police whistles Cliff Nichols sighed deeply and drifted off into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXIII

“OUT OF THE MOUTHS—”

TWO days later Richard Monckton was arraigned in the Court of Special Sessions for indictment by the grand jury on the charge of murdering his father.

The room was crowded to the doors, and the thirty men who were to decide whether or not the circumstantial evidence was sufficient to hold the young man for trial were the only ones who were seated in any degree of comfort.

The prisoner himself, by virtue of a dramatic inspiration on the part of the prosecuting attorney, was under an ostentatiously heavy guard near his counsel, Grosvenor Hood, and had borne himself with a simple dignity that rose serenely above the attempts to belittle and deride it.

Beside Grosvenor Hood at the counsel table was seated a small, almost insignificant looking man whose high, bald head shone like glass and who moved his pallid, thin lips but seldom, and then to murmur only a word or two. It was noticeable, however, that Hood himself, distinguished in a less sensational branch of the legal fraternity, paid him almost obsequious attention; and the representative of the press, at his first coming, had stared and then scribbled furiously, for Lemuel Lazenby was the most notable figure in con-

temporaneous criminal law. Hood had not boasted vainly to The Shadows about obtaining as his associate counsel "the best in America."

Seated a little apart from them were two men who contemplated the proceedings with even deeper gravity than the rest of the spectators. One was exceedingly fat and bald, with small eyes that twinkled irrepressibly, and the other a tall, spare individual whose lugubrious countenance bore a look of almost preternatural solemnity. From motives of discretion, George Roper and Henry Corliss had been voted the only members of The Shadows qualified to represent the organization at a public arraignment in the East, and they bore their honors with fitting aplomb.

The State had already produced all but one of their witnesses, and the tense atmosphere in the court-room had crystallized slowly but inevitably into a cloud of animosity and condemnation of the prisoner, almost tangible enough to be visible. Even the judges felt it, and the indictment was so much a foregone conclusion that the reporters had begun to lose interest in the proceedings, as witness succeeded witness on the stand and told, each with more or less reluctance, of the feud between Richard and his father, and the former's desperate need of the money from which only that frail, aged life had separated him.

Beginning with the police and detectives who had answered Richard's summons to the town house in the early hours of the previous Friday morning, the prosecution had passed to Mrs. Miller, who had testified

to the prolonged differences between father and son, culminating in the quarrel, during which the latter was turned out of the house, and to the father's subsequent refusal to permit Richard's name to be uttered in his presence.

The testimony of the butler, Peter Downes, had corroborated her, as did the sworn affidavit of old Jim Ricks from his hospital bed, and this attitude of the loyal elderly servants created as profound an impression as the district attorney had counted upon.

They had been followed on the stand by various social and financial acquaintances of both the Moncktons who had added details to the account of the breach and told of the crucial state of Richard Monckton's financial affairs, throwing interesting sidelights on his impetuous, often violent disposition.

The proceedings had been constantly interrupted by a storm of objections from the counsel for the defense, but even those made personally by the celebrated associate counsel had been seldom sustained, and, with the wholly circumstantial but damning evidence against their client mounting higher and higher, they seemed to have sensed the futility of further interference.

When the name of Chester Norcross was called, Hood leaped to his feet, however, in instant protest but, having been again silenced, he seated himself once more with an almost despairing glance at his associate. The latter was watching the door and a little anticipatory smile began to settle about his stern lips.

Chester Norcross gave evidence of his early ac-

quaintance with the prisoner before the bar, and after reiterated protestations that he bore no personal enmity against him, testified, with unconsciously revealed malicious joy to the latter's unprovoked and unwarranted interference in his personal affairs, culminating in what he characterized as an attempt to take his life in a moment of murderous rage.

Cross-examination failed to shake him, and it appeared to the spectators that the defense's counsel had become merely perfunctory in their efforts to save their client from indictment, for their attempts to upset Norcross's testimony were so obviously half-hearted as to become almost farcical, and the State rested its case triumphantly, waiting with amused tolerance to see what the defense would offer in rebuttal.

During that moment of keenest anticipation two men entered the room together and unobtrusively seated themselves on a bench, which by some strange chance had been vacated by two other spectators but a moment before. The elder of these was distinguished in appearance, with broad-rimmed glasses and a small, dark mustache. He was pale, though, and his drawn face twitched occasionally as if he were in pain, while he held himself stiffly as though shielding some unseen wound from contact. His companion was pale also, but with a sallowness that to the initiated was unmistakable, and his contracted eyes wandered nervously about the courtroom.

None heeded him, however, for the collective gaze

of the multitude was fastened upon Lazenby, who had risen and was addressing the court in his turn.

“Your honor and gentlemen of the jury, the defense has only two witnesses to offer. We shall make no attempt to refute the testimony of the several witnesses who have appeared on behalf of the State and the people of this commonwealth. We shall merely by your leave bring forward a fact which has not yet been touched upon. I should like to examine Mr. Clifford Nichols if he is present.”

The clerk of the court repeated the name and the pale, distinguished looking individual who had entered with his oddly dissimilar companion rose and approached the witness stand. When he had been sworn in Lemuel Lazenby asked:

“Your profession, Mr. Nichols?”

“I am a private detective,” Cliff responded in a weak but steady tone. “A member of the firm incorporated under the name of The Shadowers.”

“Who enlisted your services in connection with this case?”

“Mr. Grosvenor Hood, of the counsel for the defense.”

“When?”

“Last Friday morning.”

“Did you view the scene of the crime?”

“I did, sir. I examined minutely the room in which Mr. de Puyster Monckton had been found dead.”

“Will you describe in detail to the Court and the

gentlemen of the jury the discoveries, if any, which you made there?"

"On the wall beside the telephone was written a series of four figures, 6-0-9-0." Cliff's quiet, well-bred voice reached to the farthest corners of the vast room and George and Henry turned and stared long and questioningly at each other. What was Cliff putting over? Hadn't that number been 6099?

"You are positive of this?" The attorney was evidently asking for a repetition to impress the fact upon the minds of the jury, and Cliff complied.

"I am certain. The figures were 6-0-9-0. They had been written with a soft lead pencil, in an irregular downward slant, with open loops and a wavering tail on the '9.' They were unevenly spaced also, the figures at both ends separated widely from the two center ones, which all but overlapped, and the pencil had been pressed so deeply into the wall-paper that it had left indentations, with a sharp gouge at the loop of the final 'o' where the lead had broken short off, leaving a superfluous downstroke and scattered dots. I discovered also the fragment of lead broken from the pencil; it was lying on the white linen floor-covering just below the telephone instrument."

Lazenby submitted in evidence the scrap of lead, and a paper tracing together with the impression from it, and although the prosecution interposed an objection it was overruled.

"Do you recognize this tracing?" The attorney passed it forward, and Cliff glanced at it and nodded.

“Yes. I made it myself, from the figures written on the wall.”

It was handed to the jury for their inspection and Lazenby continued: “What is your special line of work in connection with *The Shadows*?”

“I am the handwriting expert of the corporation,” Cliff replied with dignity.

“It was in that capacity that you assumed entire charge of this investigation into the death of Mr. Monckton?”

“Yes. It was clearly a handwriting case. By no other means could the murderer of Mr. Monckton have been traced.”

This time the prosecuting attorney’s roar of objection was sustained, but the calm assertion had made an ineradicable impression on Court and spectators alike.

“As a handwriting expert, then, would you say that these wavering, uneven figures had been written by an aged person?”

“No. I should say they had been written gropingly by one who could not see. I should say they had been written in the dark.”

Again came an objection and again it was sustained, but Lazenby went on:

“Did you make any further discoveries?”

“Not until my second visit to the estate where the crime took place. On a spike of the high iron fence, near a footpath, I found a torn fragment of worn blue serge.”

The scrap of cloth was admitted in evidence and identified, and then Clifford was turned over to the district attorney, who submitted him to a grueling cross-examination but could not shake his testimony.

As he stepped down from the stand the clerk of the court called:

“Bessie Farley.”

A little figure in a simple white frock rose from far back among the spectators and tripped forward, round-eyed and blushing shyly, but undismayed, while a stir ran around the courtroom and the prisoner himself stared in unconcealed amazement.

“This baby cannot know the meaning and nature of an oath!” The district attorney was on his feet in a moment to guard against an unexpected attack from this wholly undreamed-of quarter, but Bessie herself replied to him.

Her polite little piping voice brought instant, electrified silence into the vast room.

“Oh, excuth me, thir, but I do! My mamma told me; it meanth promithing to God to tell the truth.”

“The little lady seems thoroughly conversant—!” Lazenby began, but the prosecutor broke in upon him.

“I object on the grounds of this child’s age! Her statements cannot be acceptable as evidence! The learned counsel for the defense must indeed be at his wit’s end to go to the nursery for a forlorn hope!”

The wrangle was interrupted by the presiding judge, who announced curtly:

“Objection overruled. Let the oath be administered to the witness.”

Bessie’s little hand was promptly uplifted and her childish treble repeated the covenant unfalteringly, with a sweet seriousness that increased the impression she had made. Then Lazenby took charge.

“Bessie, where do you live?”

“At 840 West One Hundred and Tenth Street.” The lisp had fallen from her now that they were going to let her tell her own story, and help Joe in whatever was troubling him. She didn’t know what it was, except that somehow it was connected with the sad-faced young man they called the “prisoner at the bar.” Bessie smiled with happy confidence into the austere face of Lazenby.

“Who else lives there?” His tone had become almost benignly paternal.

“In our flat? My mamma and my Uncle Charlie.”

“Have you a telephone?”

“Oh, yes! It was only put in a little while ago!” Her replies came readily, with unstudied promptitude.

“Can you remember the number, Bessie?” There was an added weightiness in the attorney’s voice with this question, but the child’s naïve unconcern brought the portent of her response home to her hearers all the more poignantly.

“Of course. It’s Parkside 6-0-9-0.”

A murmur of astonishment and expectancy rose and swelled, but the Judge’s gavel descended sharply and quiet was restored. Richard Monckton’s eyes shone

with swiftly reawakened hope, Henry Corliss and George Roper were stunned and the prosecutor visibly taken aback, but the witness was wholly unconscious of any special significance in her reply and gazed in docile inquiry at the nice, gentle old man who was questioning her.

"You're sure of the number, 6-0-9-0?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. You can see it there now if you go to our house, and besides I answer it lots of times for Uncle Charlie and his friends." Her clear, sweet tones seemed to strike like a bell's peal on the highly charged tension in the air.

"Did you answer the telephone at your home last Thursday evening, Bessie?"

"No, sir. It didn't ring." She wriggled a trifle in her chair. "I didn't have any lessons to do for next day 'cause I was mumping, but mamma read to me after supper; Uncle Charlie had gone to Al's. That's how I remember; it was the last nice time we've had!"

"What time did your Uncle Charlie come home? Do you remember?"

Bessie nodded energetically.

"Yes, 'cause Uncle Charlie asked if Joe had called him up and said it was eleven; that Joe had called him at Al's and he'd given Joe our new number to telephone in an hour. He was awful worried, and waited up after mamma sent me to bed."

"It was eleven o'clock on Thursday night when your uncle came home, and Joe had called him up at Al's more than an hour before; your uncle had at that time

given Joe the new telephone number 6-0-9-0?” Lazenby reiterated impressively. “Why was your uncle worried when he returned and learned Joe had not called him?”

The district attorney sprang up with an anxious protest, thinly veiled in sarcasm, as to the relevancy of the testimony but the judge overruled him and the question was repeated.

“Uncle Charlie said he was sorry he’d given our number to Joe just then; that Joe took a risk in calling from where he did.” Bessie spoke slowly, wrinkling her small brow in the effort to remember.

“And where was Joe, Bessie, when he called your uncle up at Al’s? Do you know?” Lazenby leaned toward her.

“No, thir.” The child shook her head and the neatly braided loops of brown hair flapped about her ears. “I gueth he wath vithiting in thombody’th houth where there wath a baby, cauth Uncle Charlie thaid thomthing about a ‘crib.’ ”

This time the murmur became an uproar, and it was with difficulty that the judge quelled it. The associate counsel for the defense gave Bessie a moment in which to recover from the embarrassment that had tripped her tongue to lisp again, and then inquired gently.

“Did Joe call up on the telephone the next day—last Friday?”

“No, sir. Uncle Charlie went out early and bought a paper and when he came in he looked terrible white

and sick. My mamma cried out, and then they went into the kitchen and shut the door and talked ever so long. I was playing with my doll that Joe gave me, and when they came out, Uncle Charlie said if anybody called up and I answered the telephone, I wasn't to talk to them if I didn't know who they were and I wasn't to say a word about Joe to anybody, ever! I wasn't to let anybody know I had heard his name! Uncle Charlie said that the Bad Man would come and get me if I did. He looked awful scared and my mamma, too, and—and she cries a lot!" The piping voice trembled and Bessie's sensitive lips quivered a little. "My Uncle Charlie don't play with me any more, either, and I was glad when the lady that talked to me in the Park said I was to come and help Joe."

The lady! This time George and Henry ventured a second questioning, suspicious glance at each other. It could not have been a female operative of the police, for the authorities had known no more than they of this sudden turn of events—but Ethel? Had their enterprising secretary added kidnaping to the list of her enormities in the interest of The Shadowers?

But Lazenby was going on in his smooth, fatherly tones.

"Who is Joe, Bessie?"

"He's a friend of ours—Joe Geiger. He's awful nice!" Her round eyes suddenly shone. "He gave me a lovely doll, and once when he was showing us some jewelry—rings and things—he wanted to give me a bracelet with pretty blue stones in it, but mamma

wouldn't let him; she said a—a curse would go with it, but Joe and Uncle Charlie just laughed.”

“Have you seen Joe since last Thursday night?”

Bessie shook her head again, dolefully this time.

“No, and Uncle Charlie says we won't; that Joe's going away—!” Then her eyes suddenly alighted and her small finger pointed straight at the sallow stranger who had entered with Cliff Nichols and who now sat cowering in his chair. “Why, there he is now! —*Hello, Joe!*”

The innocent, joyous greeting rang out like the voice of doom and in the shocked silence that followed the man leaped wildly to his feet. “I done it! I killed the old man, but Gawd knows I didn't mean to!”

When the prisoner had been released, the self-confessed murderer of de Puyster Monckton led away, and a semblance of quiet restored to the hysterical throng, one of the guards who had attended Richard Monckton turned to the other.

“I never saw the beat of that in Special Sessions!” he exclaimed behind his hand. “The child not even knowing she was sending a man to his death! For what do they allow kids in court? The Gerry Society should have put a stop to it!”

“'Twas not the child done it, Jawn. 'Twas fate workin' agin him!” The second guard shook his head. “He'll get the chair and serve him right! Ain't there a sayin' that out of the mouths of babes and suckers comes the word that'll put you wise?”

CHAPTER XXIV

ETHEL'S REWARD

A FORTNIGHT later the six Shadowers were holding a meeting in the central council chamber, presided over by Rex Powell, and gravely regarding three objects which were assembled on the table before them. The first was a series of large, typewritten sheets of paper fastened together with a clip, the second a certified check, and the third a square flat jeweler's case of sizable dimensions.

"What do you suppose has been the matter with Ethel?" Henry asked anxiously. "Never knew her to be sick a day since she first came to us, and she hasn't shown up since the case ended! You're sure she is actually at home, Rex? Mrs. Gorham isn't stalling for her? She told you Ethel had been really ill, but that it wasn't serious? Why the devil wouldn't she say what it was, then?"

"I don't know," Rex Powell replied. "I'm convinced she is telling the truth when she says Ethel is at home, but Ethel herself may have had some reason of her own for denying herself to us all this time. However, Mrs. Gorham assured me over the 'phone this morning that my secretary would be able to resume her duties to-day."

"I've prided myself on my ability to read charac-

ter!" George shook his head. "It's stood me in good stead in every 'con' game I've worked for nearly forty years, but I'm ready to put Ethel down as one of my permanent failures. To tell you the truth, I thought she had been unduly smitten with the charms of our client, and I wonder how she'll take the news of his renewed engagement to Barbara Norcross that was published yesterday in all the papers? Still, there is the young man of the daily flowers and the donor of the Pekingese. We must still take him into consideration."

"That's tommyrot about Monckton—Ethel stuck up for him because she believed in him, and that's where she showed common sense." Phil Howe tilted his chair back and thrust both hands into his pockets. She and Cliff were the only wise ones in the bunch, and it's lucky for young Monckton that we gave Cliff the case to handle! Lucky for the reputation of The Shadows, too, but the rest of us were prize boobs! Why, even when I found out that Lucy was in with a gang, I couldn't convince myself that there'd really been a thief there in the Monckton house and that she'd tipped him off to the lay!"

"But you saved the day in the end, Phil!" Cliff Nichols exclaimed. "I suppose I ought to have taken you all into my confidence, but I couldn't change your opinion and I meant to work it out alone. I know we agreed to wait till Ethel came back for our final reports on the case, but it's all wound up, now that Monckton's check has come, and I want to know how

you got on the Regner woman's trail again and why it led to that cellar just when Joe Geiger had opened fire on me."

"I found an old friend of mine who'd worked in with the Dobson gang and he told me where she had been staying since Sunday, when she and the rough-stuff guy got rid of me so neatly—she was with the mother of one of the boys who's doing time now," Phil explained. "I watched from Monday, when I was tipped off, till Wednesday morning, when Joe Geiger came to her. She must have turned him down but she didn't dare give him the go-by entirely, for when that Charlie Curran showed up at her joint that night she went with him down to the old fence, Lazarus, on Hester Street. I did business with him myself in the old days, and I knew about that cellar, but of course I wasn't wise that it was Joe who'd croaked the old man, or that they wanted to hide him there that night.

"Charlie must have got cold feet, for it was Lucy who went to Al's speak-easy, got Joe and took him back down there. She came out alone and waited in the alley, and me with her, although she wasn't wise to that; and after a bit she beat it into the cellar of the empty saloon next door to Lazarus' and listened. With the first shot she was through that connecting door and me after her! I switched on the lights and grabbed her when she tried to hold me back from reaching Joe, and then all at once Ethel was there, knocking the gun from his hand, but Cliff was down!

“When I saw that I forgot all about the she-devil and sailed into Joe, but the fight was all gone out of him and he was blubbering like a kid. The police whistles were blowing like hell outside and I knew Cliff would be taken care of; we didn't want our game gummed up at the very last, for I'd twigged what was up and that the bulls would get all the credit, so I made Ethel help me hustle Joe up that alley and through another that I was wise to, till I could get him to Pink-Eye Mike's, where we kept him till the morning of the grand jury proceedings.

“Ethel rushed off to the hospital, where they'd taken you, Cliff, and as soon as she'd found out you only had a nicked rib from Joe's shot she came and told me and then beat it away somewhere. That's all I had to do with it.”

“It was more than any of the rest of us did to help Cliff!” Lucian Baynes remarked. “I feel like a crass idiot! Cliff, tell us now what put you on the right track about the real 'phone number written there on the wall.”

“Ethel did that!” Cliff smiled. “That was why I took her into partnership with me, but I might have known I couldn't handle her!”

He told them in detail all that had occurred since Ethel's discovery, to the midnight hour when he had followed the murderer from the lonely Dobson farm by way of trolley and ferry to one after another of his old friends and accomplices until he found temporary shelter at “Al's” illicit saloon.

"Then you appeared on the scene, Phil, trailing Lucy when she came Wednesday evening to take Joe down to Lazarus' cellar," Cliff added with a laugh. "You trailed them and I brought up the rear, but when you two halted in the alley, after she had reappeared, I slipped past you and went into the cellar after Joe. The rest you know, but I made one bone-head play and I'm going to confess it. Do you remember, Phil, when we first examined the Monckton house I asked you to jimmy the desk in the room where the murder took place and bring me whatever papers you found there that contained anything except ordinary accounts?"

Phil Howe nodded.

"I did. I brought you some that just had figures and dates written on them, and the initials 'R. W.' and an 'R' by itself here and there. You never said anything about them after I gave them to you."

"Because I forgot them completely! I never even examined them till George learned from that private detective that the old man had hired him to follow Richard and queer his financial game. Then I found those papers were a record of Radway Wicks' reports and expense accounts, together with the various sums de Puyster Monckton had spent in his different attempts to break his son. Richard had to be told, of course, after he was set free, and his father's own lawyer, Raymond Sanders, supplied the motive.

"The old man was determined to ruin Richard in Wall Street in the hope that it would break his pride

and bring his son to him for a reconciliation, willing at last to carry on the banking institution which his ancestors had founded. It hadn't anything to do with the crime, but it complicated the investigation rather seriously for us. Did Wicks explain to you why he went to the Manor late that Saturday night?"

Cliff turned to George, who nodded.

"He trusts in our appreciation of the ethics of our calling which would prevent us from giving him away, but he went to get possession, if he could, of the very memoranda which Phil had found and given to you. He'd been paid good money but he'd lent himself to a pretty rotten game of the old man's, even if it was from a clean motive, and it would put him and his agency in a shady light and injure his business." George paused and added: "It all seems clear enough now, especially with Joe's confession. Cliff had doped out how the murder occurred accurately, hadn't he?"

"Yes." Rex took up the typed sheets from the table. "Here's the verbatim report on it. Let me see—Joe tells about the Regner woman being ready to quit and line up another crib to crack, but deciding to first make a clean sweep of that one by grabbing whatever valuables were left unguarded in the town house. Joe found it a cinch—he was working alone on Lucy's tip—and when he'd finished searching old Mr. Monckton's room he noticed the 'phone on the wall and couldn't resist calling up Charlie, who was waiting for him at Al's. Here's what he says himself:

'I thought it would be a hell of a joke, and when I got him on the wire I told him there'd been nothing to it, and I was all packed up ready to get the stuff downtown. I said I'd meet him later at Al's, but he said "no," to call him up at his own joint and he gave me the number. It was all dark and I hadn't another hand to flash the light, but I wrote the number down on the wall like the dick says—6-0-9-0. I hooked up the receiver with the other hand just as I finished, and then I heard something behind me and the electric lights burst out!

" 'Me pencil broke in me hand, but I didn't know it then! I whirled around and there stood the old guy, right between me and the door! I dunno what hit me then, but I'd been sniffing the snow to nerve me up to the job, and after all me bragging there I was pinched! I grabbed me billy out of me pocket and let him have it over the head, but when he dropped I kind of come to. Then I seen I'd croaked him for fair and I beat it in a hurry, tearing me pants leg on the fence, but I didn't know that, either, till I got to Al's. He sent me out to his sister's dump in the sticks and it was there the dick found me, but I never meant to croak the old guy, only put him to sleep. Before God I never meant it and I see him in front of me all the time! I ain't had a minute's rest and all the snow in the world don't drive the sight of him away! I'm glad it's over!'" "

There was silence for a moment after Rex had finished reading, and then Lucian Baynes asked:

"How did you ever induce him to go to court with you when Monckton was arraigned?"

"I didn't have to use much persuasion," Cliff replied. "I saw to it that Pink-Eye Mike kept him charged up with all the dope he wanted, made him believe we were pals of Al taking care of him, and that he hadn't a chance in the world of ever being found out. He had never seen me, and I reminded him it was night when he ran away from the farm, so the amateur detective who had gone there to smoke him out wouldn't know him if he came face to face with him. He had the guilty man's usual craving to see the suspect who was going to suffer in his place, the 'snow' had given him an abnormal sense of security, and when I suggested that it would be a good joke to watch the indictment he couldn't resist the temptation."

"But how did you know the kid was going to be there? Somebody must have planned that coup on the part of the defense, and you were all prepared to go on the stand." Henry spoke in an aggrieved tone. "George and I sat there gasping like fish out of water!"

"Grosvenor Hood and Lemuel Lazenby called on me at the hospital, a few hours after Ethel had inquired about my condition, and told me the line they meant to take and that little Bessie would be produced in court to tell her story, corroborating my own testimony on the stand. I knew, of course, that Ethel was at the bottom of it then, but I was worried about Joe, till I got out of the hospital and Phil told me

he had him safe and sound. It's a good thing the police caught the Regner woman just as she was preparing to leave the country. She'll go up as Joe's accomplice, or accessory before the fact, even if they can't fasten anything else on her, but they'll never get her to confess; she isn't that kind. Now, if Ethel—?"

He got no further, for at that moment a key was inserted in the office door and Ethel herself walked in. She was pale and there was a rather sheepish air about her, but at the chorus of greeting she came slowly through the paneled opening into the council room and stood before them.

"I couldn't come before," she protested in answer to the volley of reproachful questioning. "I was sick, really, but I'm all right now."

"Ethel!" Rex Powell exclaimed. "You weren't hurt in the fight in that cellar, were you? Did a stray shot—?"

"Goodness, no!" She smiled. "I wouldn't let you have the laugh on me, though, by telling you what I'd got out of this last case! I suppose I'd better tell, though, just what I did do, and get it over. You've heard from Mr. Nichols where I was when you thought I'd gone to see my family?"

"We never believed *that* for a minute, Ethel, but we wouldn't contradict a lady." Rex smiled, too, but there was a gentle rebuke in his tone. "Sit down and assure Cliff for me that I tried to obey his instructions."

“About bringing me to the office here in the mornings and seeing me home?” Ethel seated herself. “We both obeyed him, for you couldn’t help it if I wasn’t here to be taken home, and Mr. Nichols hadn’t told me I couldn’t go out alone during office hours if I liked! He only said for me to be sure he found me here at my desk when he came back, and I would have been if I hadn’t got sick! You remember when I gave you his message that Tuesday? Well, afterwards I got thinking, and I knew we’d have to get little Bessie and hold her as a witness before her mother and uncle rushed her out of town somewhere. I stayed in the office most of Tuesday afternoon and then went up to her house to see if I couldn’t get hold of her, but I didn’t have any luck. I came back in time for you to take me home, Mr. Powell, but I was up where Bessie lived at seven the next morning, in the vestibule, when she slipped out with a kitten in her arms.

“She was afraid to speak to me at first and said her mamma had punished her for talking to me the day before. They were going away right off, to the country, but her uncle had said they’d have to leave the kitty behind and she had run out to give it to a little girl across the street.

“I told her Joe was in trouble, that Mr. Nichols really was a friend of his and I’d come to take her to Joe, so he could give her a message for her uncle. I piled her and the kitten into the taxi that had brought me up there and took them both to a woman I know

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down on the East Side who—who doesn't ask many questions. She kept Bessie for me till Friday, when the case came up, and in the meantime I sent Mr. Lazenby to Bessie and he explained what she was to do to help Joe and her uncle. It—it was a kind of a mean trick to play on her, but after all it was justice, wasn't it?"

She glanced appealingly around the table and Rex said:

"It was necessary, vital, and her uncle himself will get off lightly. But I don't understand! I called for you on Wednesday morning and brought you to the office. You were gone when I called for you in the evening to take you home."

"I know. After I left Bessie in good hands I hurried home so as to be there when you came for me." Ethel flushed. "I was worried all the morning because Mr. Nichols didn't come in, for I knew he was on the trail of that 'Joe' and I was afraid something must have happened to him! In the afternoon Mr. Howe came and left word for Mr. Nichols that he was on Lucy Regner's trail, and it came to me in a flash that if I followed him I could find Joe myself, for Mr. Nichols had spoken of the Regner woman to Bessie, and I knew she was mixed up in it."

"Holy Cat!" Phil Howe stared. "You didn't trail me to Al's—?"

"I followed you to a cheap flat away up near the Concourse, and I was right at your heels that night when you trailed a woman and a young man who'd

called for her down to Hester Street and back uptown again." Ethel's tone was meek, but an irrepressible dimple showed in her cheek and her downcast eyes were twinkling. "Then they separated and you and I followed the woman to that saloon that was wide open. I saw Mr. Nichols then, hanging around outside, and when the woman came out with another young man and you started to follow them, Mr. Nichols slipped in behind and I—I finished the procession! It was good they took the subway, so there were cars enough on the train for all of us, and I only had to watch Mr. Nichols, who was up in front in the same car with me, to keep in line.

"I was just half a block behind when we all straggled to that alley back of the pawnshop and I saw Mr. Nichols slide around, past where you were hiding and watching the woman, down into the cellar where she had left the young man. I wanted to go after him, but I was afraid Mr. Howe would spot me. Then the woman went into the cellar next door, with you following and me just behind, and the shooting started! I was the last one through that connecting door, when he turned on the lights, and I saw Mr. Nichols fall and that young fellow shooting wild! I—I made him drop his gun and then he went all to pieces and Mr. Howe and I got him off to that place you call Pink-Eye Mike's just before the police came. I never in the world would have left Mr. Nichols hurt like that, only Mr. Howe showed me that he would want us to finish his work for him!" Ethel paused and

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then added: "Isn't it fine that Mr. Monckton's girl didn't go back on him after all? Did you see the papers yesterday? I told him so when I saw him in the Tombs, but that was only to make him feel better; I didn't really believe she'd stick, though I hoped so!"

The Shadows exchanged relieved glances and then George Roper asked:

"Wouldn't you stick yourself, Ethel? By the way, how is that angelic dog you brought here when you first came back to us three weeks ago?"

"I gave him away to somebody who doesn't know his disposition!" Ethel saw that the six pair of eyes were upon her, and flushed more deeply than ever as she glanced down at her waist, no longer adorned with its accustomed corsage bouquet. "Miss Norcross was in love with Mr. Monckton, I guess, even if she couldn't quite believe at first that he was innocent, but this love business is a lot of bunk, anyway! It's catching, but half the time people don't know whether they've got it or not!"

Phil roared and even George chuckled, but Rex Powell said very seriously:

"They are both very grateful to you, Ethel. We've received from Mr. Monckton the largest check of our career as The Shadows, but see what he and Miss Norcross have sent you together!"

He opened the jewel case and displayed a single string of pearls, small but perfectly matched and of an exquisitely glowing luster.

Ethel gave a little gasp of pure delight and clasped

them about her throat. Then the whimsical little smile they knew so well came over her face and she exclaimed:

“It’s wonderful of them, but I couldn’t have put them on last week—not with the other reward I got for finding Bessie!”

“What do you mean?” Rex demanded.

“Mumps!” Ethel made a little grimace. “I caught them from her, and I wouldn’t let you know for fear you’d laugh! But all of us together made the greatest catch of The Shadows yet, didn’t we, when we found the murderer of de Puyster Monckton?”

THE END

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